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## Making meaning from international educational experiences: Transforming inner landscapes

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**MAKING MEANING FROM INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES:  
TRANSFORMING INNER LANDSCAPES**

**A Thesis  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Education**

**Sami Lyn Story  
University of Northern Iowa  
December 1998**

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Entitled: Making Meaning from International Educational Experiences: Transforming  
Inner Landscapes

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## DEDICATION

**In honor of my family—without whose continual commitment to the educational process  
this thesis never would have been conceptualized.**

**In honor of my teachers—without whose continual assistance during the educational  
process this thesis never would have materialized.**



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Going abroad made me think. It makes me think about everything I encounter instead of just saying, “Yeah that’s the way it is.” Instead, I say, “Why? Why do we do it this way?” I look at everything and say, “Why are we reinventing the wheel? Why do we have to start fresh? Why can’t we use ideas that are already there and seem to be working fine and just adjust them to fit our needs?” . . . It’s just exposure to the world. Because when you meet people, anything from what you know, you have to believe that anything you learned might be wrong.

*Gillian, France*

I was the first white person who had stayed in that village since 1935. It was overwhelming for me a lot of the time for people, especially the kids, to just surround me and just stare at me . . . I would be walking down the street and people would just call out and wave and it was really uncomfortable because these are people who I didn’t know and they were everywhere . . . it was like you were on this parade all the time, and they were just waving and smiling . . . if I had been there for another couple of months I probably wouldn’t have been as uncomfortable in those situations.

*Kim, Ghana*

We slept on a lot of trains. I remember coming back up from Rome. We left Rome at midnight and were going to go up to the French Riviera. We contemplated getting off the train at two thirty in the morning to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa. I remember I woke up and saw the train pulling into Pisa and I’m like, “Oh, we’re in Pisa. Let’s get off the train.” And then I just rolled over and said, “We’re in Pisa. I don’t want to see the Leaning Tower. Let’s go back to bed.”

*Ryan, Germany*

We were having dinner one night. And a flier came through the mail slot from a new car company—Toyota. My host mother came back irate. She ripped her chair out and said in German, “We do not buy foreign cars. We do not buy anything foreign. We are German and we buy German cars and German products.” And she looked at me and she had this look that was terrible. Finally I realized what had been wrong for months. She just was totally against foreigners. And her husband had concealed this because he wanted to return the favor my family had done for him in America. I mean, Germans are very polite, they are conscientious and he wanted in the worst way for me to, he was hoping that she would be okay. I, in the meantime, was drawing more and more inside.

*Adrienne, Germany*

In Japan I made lots of friends and didn't want to leave. I wasn't ready to come home. Then in Mexico, when I talked to my family on the phone, I was like, "Wow, I miss them." And I missed the things they were doing. My brothers were in sports and stuff. But an hour later, I was fine. We had a group of friends there that I was really close to, and by the end I wasn't ready to leave. I could have stayed a little longer. But it was really good when I got home. I mean, I was really happy to be home. But then, a few weeks later, I was ready to go back again. I flip-flopped back and forth. Usually I'm really comfortable being gone. I've found that I love getting to know the people of the places where I am at, and I think that is what has given me a desire to learn languages.

*Cassie, Mexico*

I had always known that I wanted to study abroad, but in high school I wasn't ready . . . up until then [going to France], my parents always told me what to do . . . I didn't realize it when I was there. They pretty much dictated everything. And so all these problems that I'm having now with them stem from me going to France. Because that was the break. You know, I didn't need them to tell me what to do anymore. I mean, I knew I couldn't ask my parents for advice, especially the second year, because I had a lot of trouble getting a work permit . . . and I couldn't tell them about it because it was different and they didn't know what kind of things I needed and how I needed to get it done . . . I guess I tried to talk about it and share with them, but it wasn't the same . . . I just didn't realize it until I came back and they wanted to control my life again and I just said no . . . you know, I had been on my own for two years . . . so last year was not really strained, but it was uncomfortable.

*Sonora, France*

After the first week and a half I really wondered if I'd done the right thing . . . the first month was the most difficult . . . once I got done worrying about the day-to-day things, I could actually enjoy what was going on. Sometimes, when I'd wake up, I'd go out on the balcony and think, you know, "This is such a great feeling to be here. I need to remember this otherwise I might not make it back." Because if you forget how wonderful it is, you might say that it's not that important to go back. I don't think that will happen to me, but I think I am losing some of it, to a certain extent. I can still say it was the best year of my life, but sometimes I don't know all the reasons why. It's hard to explain. You always hear about people talking about waking up when they're 40 and saying, "What have I done?" I know it gets overused, but I don't want that to happen . . . so I'm always looking for new experiences. Somewhere to travel, or . . . or people who have traveled here to talk to.

*Cameron, Germany*

As these comments suggest, the experiences of students abroad were as vastly different and as unique as their own fingerprints. They brought their own values, hopes, and dreams with them as they encountered foreign cultures and composed meaning from their experiences. There were many different ways the students in this study approached study abroad ventures: some students seemed to readily accommodate all their experiences into their world views while others only accommodated information into their pre-existing value structures when the disconfirming evidence became overwhelming. This study has been undertaken, therefore, in order to gain a more complete understanding of the complex issues international educational experiences can initiate for college students.

International educational experiences have great transformative potential—they can be life changing. Studying abroad is one of many events that may cause people to undertake a major revision of their worldviews (e.g., a traumatic event, a terminal illness, a mid-life crisis). It is also one in which a growing percentage of United States college students participate. The personal transformation that can take place during a study abroad experience can be masked by chaotic emotions. The stories students tell of study abroad often are sometimes boiled down into quick info-bytes—quick stories that are not revealing at all of the deeper ideas and beliefs inside a particular student. It takes time, trust, and energy to discuss encounters with difference on a more substantive level.

The topic of this thesis comes out of my own experiences. I traveled abroad for the first time when I was seventeen years old. Living with a Japanese host family for two months was an educational experience paramount to any classroom experience I had up

until that point. It opened a whole new world of interests, desires, and goals in my life. Realizing that humans are connected through emotions, experiences, and knowledge, but that those universals are filtered through a cultural lens was pivotal in challenging me to look within myself to discover many biases and prejudices that seemed to grow out of my own fears of the unknown and the misunderstood. As I proceeded through college, I found myself seeking out individuals with ideas drastically different from my own to push my comfort level. I knew much of my behavior was motivated by my experiences abroad but I was strangely limited in expressing why that was so. It was far easier to listen to others than it was to express my own views. It felt as if everything was in flux.

An interest in cultures eventually led to a Bachelor's degree in 1990 in East Asian Studies and three more study abroad ventures. Upon entering graduate study in education, I found myself increasingly intrigued by the notion of the transformative potential of study abroad if for no other reason than to clarify my own thinking. As my interest in the subject grew, so did my reading of the literature in that area. It was surprising to see the lack of systematic research and the virtual non-existence of conclusive results in the research. It was as if my intangible reality was unsupported by the tangible research studies. Articles in journals seemed not to echo my own internal sense of study abroad, and the more I spoke with others who had been abroad the more I felt compelled to introduce travelers' voices into the literature on the topic.

In order to approach this topic from a well-grounded perspective, I read. A review of the relevant literature found that studies typically have been conducted using survey research to assess the "impacts" of study abroad experiences, seeking to discover



correlation between selected variables. This information, though useful for some purposes, did not seem to portray the depth, richness, and personal qualities of the changes I sought to illustrate through conversations with students. This study has attempted, therefore, to frame student experiences in a way that allows their own voices to help explain the transformations that can occur as a result of study abroad.

Their stories have been presented in order for the reader to have a more complete picture of what international educational experiences have meant to these students. In-depth interviewing was used as a means to better understand student experiences abroad. Particular attention was given to the meaning students seemed to derive from these experiences.

In this chapter, a brief overview of the history of international education in the United States is presented. This background information may help us interpret the basis upon which study abroad programs are typically structured for students in higher education. Following this historical overview is a brief discussion on college matriculation as an enculturation process, that is, what the literature suggests about how college affects students. The third section addresses how students may make meaning from international experiences. Finally, a discussion of the method and definitions for this study are outlined.

### Statement of the Research Question

This study sought to examine the common issues and to find patterns that may help explain the transformative potential of international educational encounters for students in higher education. In order to better understand the phenomenon of

international educational experiences, students themselves were interviewed, and their stories interpreted.

### International Education in the United States

In order to more thoroughly understand the historical influences that have framed the experiences of students abroad, a select review of the history of international education in the United States follows. Political, economic, and social globalization through travel has affected our lives for centuries (Reich, 1991); however, focus on travel as formal educational experience in this country is a relatively new phenomenon. It was only after World War I that the United States government began to significantly support international educational experiences financially, and although the financial support was then available to students, it was not until the 1960s that international exchange in the United States became popular as unrest shook the country and interest in other cultures became widespread. During the 1980s, the numbers of United States citizens abroad increased dramatically as the children of those who had traveled two decades before came of age (Davis, 1995; Oppen, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990).

Historically in the United States, the goal of international education for youth has been to generate globally minded individuals “who will lead society in all its parts: business, government, the professions, education, and so on” (Goodwin & Nacht, 1991, p. 84). Institutions of higher education have tried to respond to these calls for leadership in a global market by supporting opportunities for international student travel. Colleges and universities have provided avenues for such opportunities through support for study

abroad endeavors, multicultural centers, Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, and international student and scholar offices across the nation.

### College as Enculturation

That college itself is a life shaping experience is by now a truism (Astin, 1993; Boyer, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The intense experiences of young adults through their college years significantly influence, shape, and impact the rest of their lives. Late night discussions in residence halls, participation in clubs and organizations, support for community service endeavors, classroom debates—all these can be invigorating to students, stretching their minds, bodies, and moral beliefs. Through encounters such as these, students can experience a dissonance of values that may challenge them to find new ways of looking at issues. In a comprehensive resource, researchers Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have documented such effects of college on students. Others (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1981; Perry, 1970) have also supported the idea that for the college student, an encounter with a virtual plethora of ideas and values profoundly shapes the college experience.

Encountering cultural and ethnic diversity does not always endorse a globally minded attitude, however. Increasingly, as Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1996) purport, in our culturally diverse communities we are “simultaneously fragmented into loose and shifting associations of individuals, interest groups, and tribes, yet drawn more closely into a larger web of life” (p. 3). Finding the balance between individualism and a common good can be challenging. Making meaning of inconsistent and sometimes incompatible values can also be a formidable process, but this task is of expanding

importance in our global society. As attending college is an enculturation experience, so is the act of international travel. International educational experiences can aid students in understanding values and issues that reach far beyond their own borders.

### International Educational Experiences

The inner transformations that may take place in students during international educational experiences can be challenging to articulate. As with other potentially life-changing events, students may have limited access to their own cognitive processes, and can therefore have difficulties expressing completely their transformations. Patience and careful listening may be required when listening to student stories. The focus of this study centers on thoughtfully and deliberately portraying these student experiences appropriately. This study was conducted in order to more comprehensively understand how an intimate look at another culture makes a difference to those students who augment the traditional college experience with a study abroad experience. Also of import was the question of how students organize and articulate changes that may take place through such an experience. Overall, how students understand and reflect upon experiences abroad and compose meaning from them was explored.

The potential impact of encounters with cultural differences cannot be understated. We know that cultural influence is a significant determinant in making meaning (Dykstra & Parks, 1986; Eck, 1993). If it is indeed true that all humans develop frameworks for making meaning (Bruner, 1990; Fowler, 1981; Frankl, 1959; Piaget, 1977), what sort of revisions take place in the cognitive and value-related frameworks of students when their values are challenged through international educational experiences?

In other words, how may students synthesize all their experiences into previously constructed schemas? College itself is a time for students to be challenged and grow. If an experience abroad alters an outlook or changes a traditionally held perception, in what ways do those revisions take place?

Culture is an extraordinarily fascinating—and equally complicated—concept. Goodenough (1969) noted that “culture provides a tool for organizing experience” (p. 322). Eugene d’Aquila (1979) took the idea of culture as organizing experience one step further, asserting that the human desire to make meaning of our lives, to develop a faith pattern by which we conduct our daily interactions, is much more than a simple tool for organization, it is a biopsychological imperative. D’Aquila asserted that all humans have a need—an imperative—to make meaning of our lives and that this need transcends cultural differences. He, as well as others (Bruner, 1990; Maslow, 1968), has argued that this need is crucial to our existence. The process of meaning making, the construction of meaning, is that which this study has sought to illuminate.

### Reviewing the Literature

It is the role of this study to elucidate how students make meaning from international educational experiences. Yet, in reviewing the literature that addresses the study abroad experience it became apparent that most research conducted on this subject has aimed to assess only the “impact” of study abroad programs. These impact studies may be categorized into five study types: attitudes (Abrams, 1979; Allaway, 1980; Cash, 1993; Gerner, Perry, Moselle, & Archbold, 1992; Hensley, 1978; Juhasz & Walker, 1992; McCabe, 1994; Oppen, 1991; Rabinowitz, 1994; Sharma & Mulka, 1993; Tomlinson,

1950; Zorn, 1996), world-mindedness and ethnocentrism (Carlson, 1991; McCabe, 1994; Sharma & Mulka, 1993), language acquisition skills (Brecht & Robinson, 1993; King, 1990; Maiworm & Teichler, 1996), employment status (Maiworm & Teichler, 1996; Meara, 1994; Oppen, 1991), and personal development variables such as self-esteem and self-efficacy (Juhász & Walker, 1992; Laubscher, 1994; Zorn, 1996).

Studies on the five areas described above have been quantitative in nature and have been organized, evaluated, and interpreted primarily through survey research. This quantitative methodology has generated data for the purpose of policy formation; however, it seems not to capture the deeper cognitive and affective changes often reported anecdotally in travel accounts and conversation. Passionate experiences appear to have been melded into dispassionate categories upon which analyses have been imposed. The statistics and numbers have perhaps masked the potentially stirring effect an international educational experience can have on an individual participant. Student voices, with their rich and moving stories, have been absent.

Scattered qualitative accounts of journeys abroad have appeared in the scholarly literature (Brunet, 1996; Laubscher, 1994). Recognizing the limited usefulness of surveys and quantitatively derived categorizations in describing the complexity of an international educational experience, some researchers have begun to incorporate short informal interviews into their studies (Byram, 1996; Cain, 1996; Sell & Craig, 1983). These few studies need to be augmented by systematic qualitative research on study abroad in order to supplement the quantitative literature.

## Methodology

An intense encounter with a different culture has great transformative potential (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). Encounters with difference can touch on exceedingly complex issues, so the qualitative approach, an inherently complex one, that was adopted in the present study seemed well matched to its goals. Works on qualitative methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) formed a part of the foundational basis for methodological soundness in this study.

At this point, we should acknowledge an ever-growing genre of popular literature that exists in travel essays, travelogues, and adventure stories—the non-scholarly works on travel abound. The titles are often dramatic: Jaguars ripped my flesh (Cahill, 1987), Pecked to death by ducks (Cahill, 1993) Into the wild (Krakauer, 1996), or Danger is my business (Craig, 1938). This literature, while entertaining, lacks the methodological rigor of systematic research, relying instead on anecdotal information. However, one might surmise that the popularity of these anecdotal works has grown because they may include crucial elements of international experiences, such as participant voices, that have traditionally been missing in the scholarly literature. Keeping this in mind, this study has been an attempt to bridge the gap between the two approaches of survey research and anecdotal reporting. It has aimed to broaden and deepen our understanding of the issues students may have in their encounters abroad. In order to enrich our understanding of the deep-rooted and complex changes that may take place through an international educational experience, this study focused on and was guided by student stories. Perkins and Salomon (1995) wrote that a primary purpose of research is not to simply discuss old

issues, but that research has an obligation “to open a field further” (p. 33). And so, in an attempt to highlight the effects international education may have on college students, this study interpreted the stories of seven midwestern college students. Through in-depth interviewing and conscientious interpretation of the issues raised during those interviews, perhaps this study can provide information that will open this field further, allowing new questions to be raised, shedding additional light on how students may construct meaning from their experiences abroad.

Information acquired in studies is dependent upon the quality of respondent information combined with research skills. Personal transformations, highlighted in this research, are often by nature internal, private, and difficult to express. This is due, in part perhaps, to our own language limitations when discussing affective changes. Dr. Wang (personal communication, Spring 1998) expressed it this way: the political iron curtain has fallen but the “iron curtain of language” is still healthy and strong. It is even accentuated during those times when we try to discuss and explain intimately personal and meaningful experiences in our lives. In a highly individualistic environment, cultural norms may also contribute to the difficulty of group sharing about experiences abroad.

### Parameters

Several parameters circumscribe the boundaries of and influence this study.

1. This study has addressed attitudinal changes and ways students compose meaning from encounters with difference as opposed to the programmatic and



administrative aspects of study abroad. Therefore, it has focused on the individuals rather than the structural elements of study abroad programs.

2. To form a more complete and authentic picture of student experiences, triangulation (consensual validation) was employed in order to portray themes with balanced perspective. Albeit there are many approaches to interviewing as a method, this study encouraged the self-directed interview, which encouraged a liberal amount of respondent freedom to address topics (self-determined) salient to their own experiences. As it would have been unsuitable for achieving the goals of this study, student responses were not augmented by surveys. An interview protocol was also utilized to provide a minimal framework for responses, encouraging students to share their thoughts on a wide variety of topics.

3. Although not an intentional goal, all respondents were traditionally aged college students with European ancestry and as such, their experiences may highlight issues different from other student populations.

4. This study was driven by an interest in how students composed meaning from international experiences. As such, effort was directed toward the metacognition of students rather than on the actual events they portrayed. In addition, the integration of information this study highlights into study abroad programs may be a promising avenue for future research.

5. Finally, the parameters of this research are consistent with the only partial knowledge any one researcher can have of a phenomenon. As a researcher, I took certain steps to expect that I had good grounds for my judgments, but must keep in mind that the

bases for those judgments are always fallible. This potential for fallibility, however, should not be mistaken for lack of soundness in reasoning.

### Definitions

1. Study abroad is used interchangeably with international educational experience.
2. Abroad is used to mean outside the United States of America.
3. The terms sojourner, journey, and travel abroad are used to connote travel abroad for a specific purpose or residence temporarily in a foreign country.
4. All respondents in this study are college students and sojourners, so the terms are used interchangeably.

### Summary

Through their words, it is my hope that this research will raise issues that resonate within the reader, and that it will help the reader view international experiences with a new and enhanced understanding of the complexity that encounters with difference may hold for students. The individuality of each student experience was treasured in this research, but it was interesting to note that common themes, or universal human experiences did emerge, illuminating the changes that may take place in student lives. These themes will be explored in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The studies that pertain specifically to research on study abroad comprise a relatively limited subsection of all the literature addressing international education in the United States. Those who have conducted survey studies on study abroad have typically been professionals untrained in research, such as international program directors, study abroad advisors, and student staff (Paige, 1977).

As mentioned in Chapter One, most research on study abroad has attempted to evaluate the impact of study abroad, measuring student outcomes and attributing them to selected variables. Though this research has been well intended, a review of the literature indicates that these quantitative studies have shown a lack of rigor and systematic methodology desired by scholars (Paige, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Over 20 years ago, Paige (1977) called for more sophisticated research in this area, and yet the last two decades have not seen a significant increase in theoretical literature. More recently, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) wrote with respect to study abroad, "Studies are often inconsistent in their findings . . . the literature in this area of study is not distinguished for the rigor of its research designs and methods" (p. 306). Much of the literature in this field reflects the fact that systematic research on education abroad is still in its infancy. Heeding the challenge of previous researchers, this study aimed to adhere to a well-designed and systematic qualitative research methodology that would enrich our understanding of international experiences as well as add to the scholarly literature in the field.

Many issues that college students (who remain in the United States for their entire education) face have been well documented, so this chapter begins with a foundational overview of the germane college student development literature. This literature though, at best briefly mentions the possibility that study abroad experiences can significantly influence a student's perception of the college experience. In order to explore the potential influence of experiences abroad, the literature in the international education arena will also be presented. Within the literature on international education, impact literature seems to pervade the field and, as such, has been included in this section. Finally, this chapter is concluded with a brief discussion of selected qualitative studies.

### College as a Transformative Experience

Through increased research over the last twenty years, college experts now have models that allow for a more complete articulation of many of the developmental changes most college students undergo. These studies have attempted to understand how college affects students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) and have found correlation between certain variables and college outcomes (Astin, 1993).

In widely varied methodological approaches, other researchers have studied moral reasoning (Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1981) and have conducted studies that have shed light on the intellectual development of students (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Perry, 1970). Their works, among others, have led to an unequivocal understanding that attending college is a transformative experience (Boyer, 1987).

The college student development literature outlined above was utilized in this study as a springboard off which to launch questions about international education for

students. This study was conducted to learn how students might be affected when they augment the traditional college experience with international educational ventures. The following section outlines representative scholarly works with respect to international education in an attempt to address that question.

### International Educational Literature

Previous reviews of work on international education may be categorized as follows: cross-cultural issues (Batchelder & Warner, 1977; Brislin, 1977; Hoopes & Ventura, 1979), evaluations (Gough & McCormack, 1967; Lamet & Lamet, 1981), policy development (Lauwerys, Nagai, & Taylor, 1967), guides (Academic Year Abroad, 1997/1998; Peterson's Guides, 1997), program descriptions (Oldt, 1968; Smith, 1971), and impact studies (Abrams, 1979; Allaway, 1980; Barrows, Klein, & Clark, 1980; Barrutia, 1979; Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Carlson, 1991; Cash, 1993; Gerner, 1992; Hensley, 1978; Juhasz & Walker, 1992; Kauffman, 1983; King, 1990; Laubscher, 1994; Maiworm & Teichler, 1996; Marion, 1974; McCabe, 1994; Meara, 1994; Nash, 1976; Oppen, 1991; Oppen, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990; Rabinowitz, 1994; Sampson & Smith, 1957; Sell, 1983; Sharma & Mulka, 1993; Tomlinson, 1950; Yachimowicz, 1987; Zorn, 1996). International education, as a field, has encompassed a great number of topical areas, many of which are only tangential to the issues focused upon in this study. The literature related to cross-cultural issues, for example, typically addresses interpersonal relations and communication. Evaluation studies refer to individual program evaluations. Policy development research has often been privately funded, seeking to inform political and educational decision-makers. Guides are perhaps the most familiar area of

international education; they have been used as aids for students to help them choose between programs of study that are offered in various regions of the world and also may provide tips for traveling. Studies conducted on one particular program in a specific locale have been categorized as program descriptions. It is, however, the last category, that of impact studies, that is most pertinent for the purposes of this study.

### Impact Studies

These studies have sought to discover the “impact” of study abroad experiences on participants. Traditionally, hypotheses have been constructed and surveys conducted to find correlates between certain factors that affect students. For reasons outlined earlier, such as varying levels of competency and training of researchers, these studies have been inconsistent in their findings, although one fairly common thread indicates that study abroad produces limited gains in students’ world-mindedness and language skills. The areas into which these impact studies may be grouped are as follows: attitudes, world-mindedness, language acquisition, future goals, and personal development.

### Attitudes

Characteristics such as tolerance and flexibility are referred to as attitudes. These characteristics have typically been measured through survey test administration in order to acquire data on attitudinal changes in international understanding, attitudes toward their homeland, and attitudes toward other cultures (Abrams, 1979; Allaway, 1980; Cash, 1993; Gerner et al., 1992; Hensley, 1978; Juhasz & Walker, 1992; McCabe, 1994; Oppen, Teichler, & Carlson, 1990; Rabinowitz, 1994; Sell, 1983; Sharma & Mulka, 1993; Tomlinson, 1950; Yachimowicz, 1987; Zorn, 1996). For example, Sell (1983) conducted

a review of five studies that attempted to measure attitudinal changes and found that little empirical verification existed. In other words, this researcher found that the five studies reviewed had been loosely formatted, lacked theoretical basis, and lacked consensus concerning what to measure. Therefore, no conclusions could be drawn from the measured attitudinal shifts. Aside from the previous mentioned difficulty, the lack of systematic research has presented another challenge for researchers—they have been unable to draw on previous works with confidence for guidance for current studies. For the most part, researchers have based their conclusions on statistical analysis of before-and-after test results, using various assessment instruments. As might be expected, the results of these studies have been mixed and inconclusive with respect to both the nature and attitude change.

#### World-Mindedness

Studies measuring ethnocentrism and world-mindedness have also produced contradictory findings (Barrows, Klein, & Clark, 1980; Bennett, 1986; Carlson, 1991; Kafka, 1968; McCabe, 1994; Sampson & Smith, 1957; Sell, 1982; Sharma & Mulka, 1993). Although most of these studies agreed that small positive gains seem to occur in student interest in and awareness of happenings outside of the United States, these same researchers cautioned against sweeping generalizations because of their lack of confidence in the findings. This has been due to questions regarding instrument reliability as well as a remarkable amount of diversity in student responses that have been difficult to categorize.

### Language

One might expect language skills to increase with time abroad; indeed, several studies bear this out (Barrutia, 1979; Brecht & Robinson, 1993; Carlson, 1991; King, 1990; Maiworm & Teichler, 1996). Given the overriding homogeneity of English use in the United States there is little motivation or opportunity for second language acquisition. These studies indicated that an important effect of study abroad ventures is increased student knowledge of non-English languages. In this study, language acquisition was the primary reason given as a motivation for study abroad by the students interviewed.

### Career Goals

Some studies have measured whether college travel abroad has an effect on future career plans (Maiworm and Teichler, 1996; Meara, 1994; Oppen, 1991). These studies suggested that after returning to the United States, many students report that they were more interested in seeking employment in areas that would provide international opportunities. Most students in these studies were polled within two years after their return to the United States, but some information has been provided by polling students decades after their return. For example, in one study (Abrams, 1979), participants in a study abroad program twenty years before were asked to reflect on the impact their international experiences had on subsequent behavior and career choices they made in their lives. Respondents indicated that, in retrospect, study abroad influenced their education and job decisions toward one with international opportunities as well as their values and sense of national identity.



### Personal Development

Personal development studies looked at the self-confidence, self-esteem, efficacy, autonomy, and independence measures of those who studied abroad (Juhasz & Walker, 1992; Kauffman, 1983; Laubscher, 1994; Nash, 1976; Zorn, 1996). Again, results were conflicting. Marion (1974), for example, found that study abroad, rather than generating positive personal change, actually had a propensity to reinforce existing attitudes. In contrast, Kauffman, (1983) found that, compared to a control group who did not study abroad, all respondents studied were impacted positively in self-esteem and independence. The Omnibus Personality Inventory was a popular test administered to measure these variables, though its use did not seem to produce conclusive findings.

### Qualitative Studies

Bresee conducted a relevant study on international education in 1985. Thirty United States teens that spent a year at Denmark high schools were interviewed, focusing on their ideas and views of Denmark and the USA. Bresee's study, though the respondents were all in high school, was similar in methodology to the study conducted for this research; the aim was to conduct in-depth interviews with sojourners in order to understand issues related to their homestay experiences. The findings indicated that those particular high school students were most intrigued by differing social and parental restrictions.

An additional perspective on international education has been offered by Craig (1983), a program director of international exchanges. Drawing on years of experience in his field, he argued that perhaps studies conducted have been missing key characteristics

that could enhance the understanding of study abroad impact on students. He echoed other researchers' frustration with the lack of systematic and informed scholarly research, urging researchers to conduct studies in such a manner that would provide tangible insight into some of the factors that truly impact those who study abroad. He suggested that future researchers might consider focusing on two independent variables: "what the student takes with him [sic]" (such as language competence and predisposition to cultural awareness), and "in-country experiences" (such as host family, travel, and study). Though Craig's words were couched in quantitative terms, it seemed that he sought to understand qualitative variables (difficulty arises in quantitatively measuring "what the student takes with him [sic]").

Laubscher (1994) conducted a qualitative study of international educational experiences that was a helpful resource for this study. He focused on out-of-class experiences abroad for students. His portrayal of student experiences illuminated a powerful component of education abroad. Through in-depth interviewing, he explored how students use their out-of-class time to enhance their own learning about cultural differences even while enrolled in a formal academic program abroad. He also found that students, when left to their own devices, naturally employed procedures akin to ethnographic methods, such as key-informant interviewing and observation, in order to learn more about the culture in which they were immersed. He therefore urged educators to construct classroom exercises that would enhance students' own natural learning tendencies.

### Summary

Findings on the impact of and the meaning made from the study abroad experience have historically been contradictory and inconclusive. This lack of congruence across studies has been attributed to, among other factors, the scarcity of trained researchers conducting research, the lack of valid and reliable instrumentation, and wide variability in the pre-departure characteristics of students. In their studies, researchers have expressed frustration with the doubted usefulness of their findings. This information led me to seek another, perhaps more insightful means for acquiring a more complete picture of the study abroad experience for students.

As researchers have gained more experience with qualitative methods, some have begun to incorporate student voices into their studies to better understand the issues students may face while abroad. It is to this growing body of literature that the findings of this study may contribute, composing a more complete picture of the possibilities of a study abroad experience for United States college students.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to explore the phenomenon of international educational experiences for college students. After reading numerous studies (described in the previous chapter) addressing the impact of international educational experiences on students, I became convinced that the quantitative research that permeates the field was sufficient for only some purposes. I felt that through reading this quantitative research, I did indeed have greater knowledge of a phenomenon, but lacked a clearer understanding of it. As a primary function of qualitative inquiry is to understand a phenomenon better (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), I believed a different approach to this topic might be helpful. My own experiences abroad as a student and discussions with other travelers fostered the idea that perhaps the studies outlined in the literature review had not wholly tapped some of the pivotal transformations students may undergo while abroad. The survey research seemed to miss the complex nuances of a study abroad journey; this same research lacked the rich tapestry of detail and emotion that find their way through student voices.

I have always been fascinated by student stories of trips abroad. Sometimes students would tell dramatic stories of strange customs and harrowing experiences, and just when I was convinced that they had horrendous experiences abroad, they would smile private smiles and murmur, "It was the best experience of my life. I would do it again in a heartbeat." Yet when queried to explain the contradictory information they just provided, students seemed surprisingly incapable of saying more.

As I heard more stories, I read more research in an attempt to integrate theory and practice with regard to this phenomenon. I read about various study abroad programs in the United States, comparing and contrasting their various campus offices. Going one step further, I read about the history of international education in the United States in order to comprehend the societal influences impacting programs today. As I read, one item continued to glare from the pages: student voices seemed absent from the scholarly literature. Scholars seemed to be *writing* about the study abroad without *listening* to those who had experienced it.

This study, then, had its beginnings in an attempt to acknowledge those students whose voices and most pivotal experiences, I felt, could enrich the research literature. By listening to the stories of those who have become immersed in another culture it may be possible to understand why students interpret encounters with difference in the ways they do.

This research was also motivated by a desire to supplement the picture presented in the survey literature on this topic. As was suggested in chapter two, the prominent studies have validated only certain types of measurable changes while leaving other rich areas unexplored. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) outlined the purposes of qualitative research as three-fold: contextualization (as opposed to the quantitative equivalent of generalizability), interpretation (in contrast with prediction), and understanding of actors' perspectives (instead of seeking causality). This study, therefore, seeks to contextualize, interpret, and better understand students' study abroad experiences.

This thesis is a merging of (a) my experiences with international travelers and travel with them, (b) the reading of various literature, both quantitative and qualitative, and (c) student stories. The purpose of this study is not, in any way, to propose a new orthodoxy that should hold consistently for students studying abroad regardless of setting; rather, it seeks to illuminate some of the issues and feelings these seven students had before, during, and after their times abroad.

Beginning with the statement of the research question, I will outline the process by which this study took form. Approximately six months before beginning this research, I conducted a pilot study in order to better develop qualitative research skills. Simultaneously (and continuously throughout the course of the study), I read literature in the travel domain and also read about qualitative research methods. The respondents were selected, and then in-depth interviews were conducted. Following those interviews, the data was analyzed in order to find emergent themes. In one case, a student journal was made available for analysis as a supplement to the interviews.

#### Statement of the Research Question

This study sought to highlight the common issues and to find patterns that might help explain the transformative potential of encounters with difference for students studying abroad as an augment to their higher education. In order to better understand the phenomenon of international educational experiences, students themselves were interviewed, and their stories interpreted.

### Pilot Study

As recommended by Glesne and Peshkin (1992), and dictated by common sense as a novice researcher, a pilot study was conducted six months prior to initiating interviews with the respondents for this study. Seven diverse individuals who had all experienced international education were interviewed. An interview protocol similar to the one for this study was used. This pilot study was instrumental in helping me acquire the skills necessary to become more confident and competent in this form of qualitative research.

Experimentation with various methods of documentation took place—from manual note taking to tape-recording with partial transcription—and after time I found what best suited my style as well as yielded the richest information. When I took manual notes, I found that respondents tended to tailor their comments based on when I was writing things down. This posed a typical problem interviewers encounter: if a respondent spoke of something particularly interesting and I wanted to give them my full attention, I stopped writing in order to make eye-contact—an action they misinterpreted as an action indicating that the topic lacked noteworthiness, so they quickly moved on to other topics. By tape-recording the interviews and fully transcribing them later, it was possible to become more attuned to respondent non-verbal communication, trusting that the verbal information would be captured on tape.

With the information gathered through the pilot study, I chose, for this study, to tape-record the interviews for full transcription. This allowed me to give ample time and attention to the respondents in order to garner as many details as possible from the

interview setting, so that “thick description” might be provided for the readers (Geertz, 1973). In addition to the tape recordings, after each interview I noted visual images, nonverbal cues, and general physical settings for my later reflection on how those things may have related to the settings in which the interviews took place.

Conducting the pilot study was a valuable experience. It provided an opportunity to test and refine different research techniques while allowing me to practice filling the dual roles of researcher and learner in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). This trial run helped me learn the fundamentals of the interviewing process. I found myself thoroughly enjoying the interviews, and was surprised by my weariness following each conversation. For me, the excitement of this process and the significance of the words they spoke reinforced the feeling that qualitative research was an appropriate research method for this study.

### Literature Review

Although there is not one ideal way to initiate qualitative inquiry, I began by reading relevant literature in the field to clarify the research question for this study. In reading this literature, I began to see how others had approached the issue of international education and was able to understand some of the basic tenets of the field. Expanding the literature review—reports from governmental agencies, books and journal articles from researchers, mission statements from international organizations, newspaper articles and travelogues, both fiction and non-fiction renderings—was a continuous process throughout the course of this study. That I conducted this extensive review underscores



the holistic nature of this research. Reading was not limited to one particular domain of study; insight was sought from numerous sources.

### The Role of Theory

There are as many different qualitative methods of inquiry as there are researchers who have written about them (Berg, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Keesee, 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Wolcott, 1995). Although there is varying opinion within the field about method, seeking to understand the subject of study better seems to be their common ground. The theoretical construct relied upon in this study was based on Bogdan and Biklen's inductive approach to theory using the constant-comparative method (1982). This approach implies a method of research that constantly keeps an eye to the overall purpose of the research, comparing findings, method, and literature. The primary purpose of theory in this study is to provide a framework for understanding of the complexity of an international educational experience.

### Selection of Respondents

Information provided by respondents, more than any other element of this study, was key in painting a more fully developed portrait of study abroad experiences. This study was dependent upon the amount of detail and depth of information the participants provided.

### Criteria for Selection

As this study was primarily dependent upon the quality of information provided by respondents, I sought students who were predisposed to a reflective stance, willing to

take a high level of risk, interested in multi-cultural experiences and transformative travel, had strong self-images, and were adept at articulating their learning. Although there was no way to be assured that these stipulations were fully met, a forthright effort was made to ensure the respondents exhibited qualities that would enhance previous knowledge of the phenomenon.

Due to time and funding constraints, it was necessary to interview students in the same general locale. There are difficulties inherent in conducting studies in one's own "backyard" (that is, with those who are found within one's immediate proximity) because of pre-established expectations and relationships that may interfere with the quality of their descriptions (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). With this in mind, I contacted the study abroad coordinator at a private college in a neighboring town and asked her to recommend certain students based on the aforementioned criteria, with a few additional stipulations: it was preferable that they had studied in a country where English was not the native language and that they had spent a significant amount of time abroad (more than one summer). Three respondents were identified through that study abroad office: Cameron, Ryan, and Kim (pseudonyms). Kim was in Ghana for only a summer session, but the study abroad coordinator recommended that I speak with her because she believed Kim would be eloquent and articulate about her experience. Sonora and Adrienne were contacted through mutual acquaintances, and the remaining two students, Gillian and Cassie, were identified through the department office at my university.

### Respondent Characteristics

Most of the respondents were from the Midwest (five were from Iowa, one was from Wisconsin, and one was from Colorado) and were, with the exception of Gillian, a graduate student, in the process of completing their senior years of undergraduate study. They had all traveled abroad during their junior years of college. All grew up in rural communities and were traditionally aged college students. They came from two-parent households. Four of the six were first-born children and they all had Western European ancestry. Each student was graduating with a major or minor in a foreign language related area. They all were attending four-year institutions in the Midwest. Five of the respondents were female, relatively in keeping with the national statistics on United States college students abroad (Institute of International Education, 1995/1996). All had been either to Canada or Mexico before high school graduation.

In keeping with the objectives of this study, I chose the depth of interviewing a few students in favor of the breadth of survey research (Berg, 1998). Seven respondents were included in this study in order to allow more individualized time with and particular attention to each student. These five women and two men had very distinct experiences, so their reflections accentuated diverse perspectives. For example, Sonora was an exchange student in France and lived with a host family for a year. Immediately following that year she returned to France, employed as a nanny while attending a French school. Cameron and Ryan both spent eleven months in Germany in off-campus housing in a section of town whose residents were (unbeknownst to them) well known for their antagonistic feelings toward foreigners. Kim and Gillian were the anomalies. Kim spent

four weeks in Ghana as part of an agricultural coop and Gillian spent two summers studying and traveling in France while she was a student in Wisconsin. A strong religious vein ran through Cassie's travels in Japan and Mexico. Through her experiences with difference she defined and refined the applicability of her religious perspectives in her life. Adrienne studied in Germany for five months, living with a host family. She planned to stay one year, but came back to the United States early because of the difficult relationship she had with her host family. Each student had a unique perspective, one that enriched the group experiences as a whole.

### The Interview

Interviewing students—hearing the emotion and sentiments in their voices—was a rewarding experience. The words of Glesne and Peshkin resonated, “The opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see is the special strength of interviewing in qualitative inquiry” (1992, p. 65). Although there are many ways to conduct studies, interviewing students seemed to make the most sense to me. Following is the procedure used for interviewing respondents.

### Contacting Respondents

Each respondent was contacted by telephone. I identified myself as a graduate student, notifying them that I had obtained their phone numbers either (a) from the study abroad advisor at their institution who described he or she as a student who had an exceptional experience abroad, (b) through a mutual acquaintance, or (c) through the department office at my university. After explaining that I was writing a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree, I asked if I might hear their stories

about their journeys abroad. All students contacted responded favorably, so we set up a time to meet. Although a time limit for the interviews was not set to allow for maximum flexibility, most interviews lasted between one and two hours.

### Meeting Respondents

All the interviews were conducted in an inconspicuous corner of a public place, over coffee or in a restaurant. I arrived early before each interview in order to examine the recording equipment and make sure it was in good order and placed as unobtrusively as possible. A lapel microphone was necessary for sound quality, and was initially a bit awkward for many of the students. Surprisingly, however, they seemed to forget about it after a few minutes.

When each student arrived, I introduced myself and we typically ordered food or drink. We spent time in the beginning talking casually; this helped to establish rapport with the students. Establishing rapport was one of the key elements in receiving good information from respondents. "Rapport is tantamount to trust, and trust is the foundation for acquiring the fullest, most accurate disclosure a respondent is able to make" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 79). The interviewing environment is not conducive to establishing that trust immediately, so I expended a great deal of effort with the intention of helping them feel comfortable in the beginning.

### Beginning the Interview

I began each interview with an explanation of the informed consent form for them to sign (see Appendix A), retaining the bottom half of each form bearing their signatures as well as mine. I explained the use of the tape recorder and of the study. After assuring

them of confidentiality (notifying them that pseudonyms would be used and identifying characteristics omitted), I offered to give them copies of their transcripts at the completion of this study. I then proceeded to ask them questions in order to complete the demographic information sheet (see Appendix B).

### Interview Protocol

An interview protocol was constructed (see Appendix C) with attention given to question order. The first questions were asked to complete the demographic information sheet (see appendix B). Low-risk questions followed, usually beginning with, as Spradley (1979) suggested, a “grand tour” question, such as “Tell me about your trip. Where did you go, when did you go, what did you do, and what did you learn from it.” I then utilized the information garnered from the grand tour question to discuss individual pieces in depth, working up to the topics requiring higher disclosure. The students in this study were not shy. Often I found that students were so willing to expand on the initial questions that I had difficulty finishing the information on the demographic information sheet.

### Interviewing

Glesne and Peshkin wrote, “Interviewers are listeners incarnate; your machines can record, but only you can listen” (1992, p. 76). The research on qualitative inquiry points over and over again to good listening skills as crucial to the success of an interview. Cahill (1987) expands this thought by referring to the genius of “creative ineptitude” researchers may use that allows the researched to feel more empowered in the presence of the researcher, often yielding more complete information. Follow-up

questions and patient probing (such as “How interesting.” and “Really?”) were used to clarify responses. Interviews were from one hour to three hours, on average lasting about an hour and a half.

### After the Interview

Following each interview, I kept a record of the place we met, questions that required further elaboration at our next meeting (if we were to meet again), notes on where to begin next time, circumstances that might have affected the quality of the interview (such as how the physical setting may have constrained or enhanced the interview), physical descriptions of the respondents, visual images from the location, and anything else that might aid in analysis and interpretation of the responses. In sum, this journal included information about the dynamics that may have affected the quality, focus, and length of interview.

### Transcription

As a novice researcher, I did not fully understand the portent of Glesne and Peshkin’s words when they wrote,

Whatever means can be afforded to minimize the agony of transcribing tapes—estimate five plus hours per ninety-minute tape done by an experienced transcriber—should be seized. The good times of data collection can quickly pall if the transcribing doldrums set in. (1992, p. 74)

I chose verbatim transcription, believing it would provide the most complete and comprehensive information about the interview for data analysis, but did not realize the tedious nature of the task.

### Analysis

In keeping with the constant-comparative approach to theory, data analysis was done in conjunction with data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). I reflected on interviews as they were completed, recording thoughts in the journal and engaging in dialectical conversation (triangulation) with my thesis mentor. Through these processes, I found that my thinking gradually became more sophisticated and my ability to analyze the data was strengthened.

I spent time reading and re-reading each transcript and corresponding journal entry. My approach echoed that of the cello master. There is a story illustrating the way a master cello craftsman approached his work. One day a customer brought in an old cello, broken in many pieces, and asked the master if he could repair it, if he could ever construct a cello from the miscellaneous battered pieces. Without saying a word, the cello master laid them out on a long table and slowly walked around the table, viewing each piece carefully. He mused to the customer that it might be possible. For days, whenever the cello master entered the room, he would slowly walk around the table, becoming more familiar with the shape and character of each piece. Only after a great length of time did the cello master begin the task of physically constructing the cello from fragmented pieces of wood (M. Waggoner, personal communication, Fall 1997).

As was true for the cello master in the story, after time, the patterns and common themes of experiences in this study became clearer. The metaphor of departures, passages, and arrivals seemed to be an effective way of organizing the respondents' experiences. Each respondent, regardless of his or her country of destination or form of



travel, underwent a cyclical process. Much like a voyage has a departure, passage, and arrival at a foreign shore with the opposite process repeated on the way home, these students had experiences departing from home, anticipating an arrival, and arriving in a foreign culture. At the completion of their periods abroad, the cycle was repeated. After further reflection, subthemes were chosen for each category.

### Trustworthiness of Interpretations

The parameters of this research are consistent with the only partial knowledge that any one researcher can have of a phenomenon. Eisner (1991) wrote, “because we can secure no unmediated grasp of things as they ‘really are,’ we cannot ever be certain of having found the Truth. We are always ‘stuck’ with judgments and interpretations” ( p. 109). We can, as researchers, take certain steps to expect that we have good grounds for the judgments we make, but must keep in mind that the bases for our judgments are always fallible. This potential for fallibility should not, however, be mistaken for lack of soundness in reasoning.

This became apparent to me during analysis. I became intensely aware of the multiple dimensions of each story and the complexity innate in human behavior. This study could have been organized in many different ways with variant results. My aim, then, has been to portray the emergent themes in the best way possible. Approaches for achieving this have included: spending a great deal of time reading the transcripts, reviewing the literature and comparing findings with students’ responses (structural corroboration), and engaging in active dialogue with others who are familiar with the various pieces of this study (triangulation, or consensual validation).

This research has been conducted with the hope that the stories of these seven individual students will resonate with the readers, that through their stories, concepts, issues, and ideas not previously seen or fully appreciated will be illuminated. The emergent themes are outlined in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The pilot waits for clearance to land. The cars on the freeway seem small from the window. From this height, they appear to be little ants scattered about moving sluggishly. I feel big; almost omniscient. Yet, I know the illusory feeling will pass soon, that I will be meeting my loved ones at the terminal, and in only a few short minutes, those same little cars will loom above, beneath, behind, and around me on the interstate. Suddenly a thought jumps to mind. Each of those cars holds people who have stories. Public stories and private stories. Complex stories and simple stories. Of all the stories, it is often the most important ones that go untold, kept as solitary mental imagery reserved for an audience of one. But every once in a while, in a rare moment, opportunity allows some of those most private musings to be shared. That deeply personal and honest sharing was of particular interest in this study.

We share our stories with those we feel will understand us, those who will listen carefully and not pass judgment, those with whom we relate easily and comfortably. In our culture of intense individualism, it can be challenging to take the time and energy required to share our experiences with others. It can often be easier and safer to maintain light conversations with others, scrupulously avoiding discussion of topics that disclose our own private ideas, affiliations, and values. And yet it is through the webs of interaction that permeate our daily lives, through discussions centering around these tough topics of values, morals, and ethics we can discover and define deeper meaning in our lives.

Each culture affirms distinct mores; one dominant characteristic of United States culture, some would argue, is its focus on individualism to the neglect of community (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996). As a people, we seldom take time to listen to others' stories as is the practice in some cultures. After hearing a true master weave a complex story, one may see why storytellers hold revered places in many communities. One lesson storytellers teach is that, not unlike qualitative inquiry, there are many ways to understand the same phenomenon, and lessons to learn from all the perspectives. Of all the forms of interpersonal communication, sharing a story—weaving emotion and thought, action and contemplation, comedy and tragedy—requires a composite of verbal agility and skillful determination mixed with a sensitivity to the powerful potential of universal human experiences.

I asked students to tell their stories. Many students had not been asked to tell their stories before, and certainly not by a non-family member. As such, many were telling their stories wholly for the first time. These novice storytellers had, until this point, distanced themselves, watching through the plane windows of their lives in quiet reflection of their experiences. They seemed to be waiting, as many of us might, for an opportunity to share their stories and, through the process, compose deeper meaning from their experiences. Moments of sharing can be powerfully moving.

They can be special moments, soul moments, moments of gestalt. These special moments tend to occur more frequently when individuals are outside their comfort zones, as when they are abroad. Cousineau (1997) edited an entire book about powerful moments when we relate to others at a level entirely genuine and authentic, sharing

stories of deep meaning as “soul moments.” Cousineau cited how Jung explained those moments of synchronicity as “more than chance, less than causality” at his 1951 Eranos conference (p. 87). Minsky (1974) also understood moments of synchronicity when he said, “We say ‘gestalt’ when things combine to act in ways we can’t explain” (p. 3).

Sharing stories about moments of “gestalt” during international experiences occurs when trust and rapport are strong. In my experience, soul moments have most often occurred at places that encourage friends to gather, such as espresso bars, bistros, trains, and in youth hostel kitchens. This sort of environment then, was where I chose to conduct the interviews for this study.

During the interviews, there were moments when time seemed to shift.

Rechtschaffen (1996) has written about shifting time to invite more spirit and soul into our lives. He has supported this idea of time shifting by acknowledging how some days are long, some short; some minutes go by like an hour and some hours like minutes. His words were resonant; for when in the presence of these students, these passionate storytellers, hours did seem to go by like minutes. In the richness of their stories, they captured the essence of their lives abroad and enriched my own understanding of the international education phenomenon. I became transfixed by the emotion in their voices. At times, only the click of the tape recorder reminded me that significant time had elapsed. Each story was vastly different with incredible complexity, but after time, common themes did seem to emerge out of the students’ individual experiences; it is these that are illuminated in this chapter.

Each respondent, it seemed, regardless of his or her country of destination or form of travel, underwent a cyclical process. Much like a voyage has a departure, passage, and arrival at a foreign shore with the opposite process repeated on the way home, these students had experiences departing from home, anticipating an arrival, and arriving in a foreign culture. At the conclusion of their trips, the process was repeated in reverse. Each had to leave the new place of abode, take a voyage, and arrive back on familiar soil. This way of organizing their experiences as the cyclical process of departing, passing, and arriving signifies much more than the physical acts of traveling, but also encompasses the ideas, emotions, and issues prevalent during each period of the cycle.

#### Departures

Real education should educate us out of self into something far finer into selflessness which links us with all humanity.

*Viscountess Nancy Astor*

After no more than a cursory look at the word “departures,” one might think this theme simplistic. It is commonsensical that one must depart in order to have an international experience. However, the simplicity implied might be deceptive. Going abroad for the students in this study involved much more, in fact, than packing their bags and acquiring a passport: it also was the manifestation of an emotional, intellectual, or spiritual desire to leave home, to metamorphose themselves and their relationships with others, and to acknowledge the reality of a larger humanity.

There were many individual motivators for travel, however, those motivators tended to follow common themes. Most sought understanding through language proficiency. All of the students had positive recollections of childhood family travel; this

seemed to influence their desire to create their own memories. Some traveled because of intellectual curiosity, others to fulfill college degree requirements. Their pre-departure preparations varied from speaking with foreign nationals at their colleges and reading literature to seeking advice from study abroad officers at their schools. While none of the respondents went abroad without knowledge of some aspect of their host country, some were arguably more prepared for the experience. Finally, the manners by which students left family, community, and familiarity were different, though universally marked by emotion and apprehension.

### Motivators for Travel

Whether to increase fluency in a particular language, or simply because of intellectual curiosity, the reasons students traveled abroad foretold much about the kinds of lessons they learned and memories they acquired while abroad.

### Learning and Utilizing a New Language

Foreign language acquisition was the most often mentioned reason for studying abroad. This might have been expected; all the respondents were college students. Students referred to the lack of emphasis on language acquisition in elementary and secondary school. Adrienne echoed others when she said,

I think the US needs to start teaching languages in elementary because it's very hard to start learning it later in life . . . the development of the brain, you know. It should be right in there with learning how to tie your shoe.

For students whose social circles abroad primarily constituted other international students, communication in the host language was absolutely essential. It was interesting, however, to notice that, in the interviews, once the students mentioned

language acquisition and dissatisfaction with their own youth education in this regard, none of the respondents spent additional time discussing this issue in more depth. Language acquisition was, perhaps, the conduit enabling them to travel internationally and also the most socially acceptable way for them to talk about their motives for study abroad.

### Intellectual Curiosity

Learning without thought is labor lost.

*Confucius*

Those respondents whose aspirations for international educational experience grew out intellectual curiosity, such as a personal connection with a foreign national in the United States or a desire for cultural understanding through language acquisition, had different approaches to their experiences than those whose primary reason for studying abroad was motivated by a need to fulfill a foreign language requirement for their major courses of study. Plog and Bates (1976) attempted to illustrate some of the differences between those who are internally motivated in contrast with those whose primary motivation for travel is external.

These researchers were familiar with travel patterns and behaviors, designating those who are motivated by intellectual curiosity as allocentric travelers, meaning their locus of control is primarily internal. Typical characteristics of allocentric travelers include less predictability in travel as well as travel to remote and less-traveled areas to visit and live. This was in contrast to psychocentric travelers, who are more likely to have an external locus of control, can be motivated by status, and are more likely to travel



in groups to well-known destinations. In this study, a psychocentric characteristic was exemplified through travel to fulfill degree requirements.

These designations, however, are not intended to be universally applicable. One can always find examples of those who initially traveled in order to fulfill school requirements but who might be quite allocentric in nature. However, Plog and Bates's designation was useful in understanding the relationship between motivators for travel and subsequent experiences. In this study, those who experienced an inherent need to travel (Sonora, Cassie, Adrienne, and Gillian) seemed to be more self-aware than the others and spent more time in reflection.

Another germane finding was that those who exhibited allocentric qualities had role models or mentors who inspired them to travel internationally. Sonora, for example, spoke of a French graduate student who took a special interest in her learning.

I had always known that I wanted to study abroad, but in high school I wasn't ready. I just couldn't have done it. I was just too scared, and I needed mom and dad too much. But then my sophomore year, well I always went to the Spanish and French tables just trying to get that fluency up, and my sophomore year there was a French graduate assistant here and she and I became friends, and so that kind of inspired me to go study abroad. Because I was just ready. And she just kind of helped me.

In Cassie's case, her mentor was a missionary she knew through church affiliation.

Our church supports lots of missionaries and . . . my idol is [name] and she is just so neat. I mean, she is the epitome of what I want to be. [A] strong Christian woman and just dynamic, she's totally awesome in every way. I was in elementary when she was in high school and my dad would work with her, and so I got to go along a lot of the times, and I just thought, "oh." I loved her. And when I was in junior high, she decided that she felt called to go to Spain as a missionary and do Christian education stuff. And so I think that was a big thing for me because she was my idol and here she was going to Spain. I think that's

why Spanish is so important, because she was like, ‘Sometime you’re going to come visit me.’

As these examples illustrate, educators and mentors can make significant impact on student lives. For Sonora and Cassie, these contacts helped them direct their energies and ideas toward international endeavors. These students tended to seek different experiences than those who went abroad to fulfill a requirement for the course of study.

### Fulfilling Requirements

To live in one land is captive.

*James Boswell*

Rather than deliberately planning their time abroad, those who exhibited characteristics more closely aligned with psychocentrism (Plog & Bates, 1976) seemed to have a more casual attitude about their time abroad, spending much less mental, emotional, and physical time in preparation. For some, their date of departure actually crept upon them before they realized it. I asked Cameron how he determined to go to Germany for a year, and he replied,

Well, I don’t know. It’s kind of weird, because I never really decided on doing it. I kind of did, to some extent, but there were other things I wanted to do too and I just wasn’t sure. I knew I wanted to continue German and then I thought International Business would be fun. I’d always thought, well if I do this, I’ll spend May term abroad and then I realized I would have to spend junior year abroad. I don’t think I really realized it. I mean, I did in some sense, but then the time came when I actually had to commit to doing the junior year abroad, and I was like, well, I guess this is it. And I wanted to, there was no problem with it, but there was no real point in time when I made a conscious decision. I had just been going with the flow the whole time.

His words illustrate the markedly different reasons students may have for going abroad. Plog and Bates’s description of psychocentric travelers maintained that they typically followed a more predictable itinerary, engaging in activities with other tourists.

In this study, Cameron, Ryan, and Kim exhibited many of the characteristics consistent with psychocentric travelers. They were more likely to tour with groups, purchase standard country souvenirs and/or travel to well-known tourist sites.

In addition to those characteristics, comments of some in this study seemed to reflect a sense of increased status associated with having “seen the world” or “doing something different.” “Exposure to the world” is how one respondent spoke of this. Kim described herself as

someone who really gets turned off following what everyone else does. I didn’t like the thought of going to Tanzania. A lot of people have already been there. And Europe, I didn’t really want to do. I wanted some kind of grass-roots experience, you know, something really off-the-wall. Ghana was the cheapest, but it was also a program that no one at [college] had ever done before.

Many people have a sense that there is “something more” than what they have experienced, either vicariously or through direct experience, in their lives and seek to understand that through international travel. This particular generation of students has grown up in the midst of a national ideal centering on pluralism highlighted with the realities of multiculturalism and interdependency. This social environment may have bred an acute sense that international travel is an essential quality of the “educated” person. For them, James Boswell’s observation that living in one’s own land is captive serves as a motivator for experiencing new lands.

### Desire for Change

Travel has long been a means of changing selves, a method of altering social status, of acquiring fame, fortune, and honor—even a profession for shape changing for acting has long been an itinerant profession.

*Eric Leed*

The word “depart” in English has been derived from French and Latin, meaning “to divide” or “to go away from” (Morris, 1985). Each student, in departing, had reasons for taking leave of familiar surroundings. Whether it was the desire to see more, to develop language proficiency, or to experience dissimilar cultural practices, each student sought change on some level. Sonora went to France to find freedom, to markedly establish autonomy from her childhood influences. She most plainly summed up her quest for change in her life.

I was a different person when I came back. I wanted to be, because I didn't like who I was before I went . . . I didn't really like myself before I went. That's the really great thing about studying abroad. Because you can be whoever you want. Nobody knows you, you can create a whole new personality. I mean I could have been Superman, you know. I could have become a Hell's Angel over there. Nobody knew . . . I had always had these personality characteristics that I admired in other people and that I just wasn't able to develop here. In some ways, I know it was always in there, that is why I've been attracted to certain things, but since I never had the chance to really develop that, there I could.

Cameron was inspired greatly by his family.

Most of the people from my hometown, they were satisfied to live there and stay home. There are very few people who want to get out. Even if their parents tell them, but the main reason for me is because of my parents. Even though my mom didn't travel, she always wanted to. Both my parents enjoy reading, and maybe that has something to do with it. To know there is always another world out there. It's not just, “We're right here and this is it.”

Cameron admired his family's values, so their emphasis on travel was influential.

For each student in this study, traveling at this developmentally crucial time encouraged the undertaking of a vision quest of sorts, a time to leave secure life to venture into the unknown. Stepping beyond their familiar surroundings served as a catalyst in understanding more about themselves.

### Memories of Travel

The memories of my family outings are still a source of strength to me. I remember we'd all pile into the car—I forget what kind it was—and drive and drive. I'm not sure where we'd go, but I think there were some trees there. The smell of something was strong in the air as we played whatever sport we played. I remember a bigger, older guy we called "Dad." We'd eat some stuff, or not, and then I think we went home. I guess some things never leave you.

*Jack Handey, "Deep Thoughts"*

Every student in this study had childhood memories of family travel, usually to Mexico or Canada. These excursions, remembered with fondness, enabled them, from a young age, to understand new places as pleasant and safe. Sonora's family, for example, spent a great deal of time camping when she was a child, and she remembered those forays with fondness.

We traveled quite a bit as a family. Camping especially, because we were too broke to do much of anything else . . . so I guess I was just used to being on the road and traveling . . . the first time I went out of the country was when I was eight or whatever, and we just went into Mexico. And I remember getting a little cowboy hat and this little egg. They're made out of these colored rocks, you know, and they are really polished and everything. I still have it somewhere. So I wanted to see other countries. From about the eighth grade on.

For each student, family road trips seemed to leave a lasting positive impression, to plant a seed that blossomed in college, encouraging them to seek out travel opportunities. These memories may have enabled them to overcome pre-departure apprehension with the thought that if they had successfully traveled once, they could do it again.

These memories of travel also influenced the measures they took in preparing to leave home. Pre-departure preparation took many forms, from more formal types of research about the destination country and social, economic, political influences, to the

informal kinds of preparatory measures, such as speaking with others who had been abroad or foreign nationals on their campuses.

### Leave Taking

The final step in the departure process was leave taking. Up until that point, family and local communities had comprised the frames of reference by which these students related to the world. It was difficult to take leave of family, support, and familiarity because their leaving symbolized much more. The process of leave taking, while fundamentally and deeply personal, was at the same time a communal experience. Families and friends were also affected by their leaving. Aside from the physical act of departing, saying goodbye was a kind of “coming of age” ritual, a small-scale exemplification of the leaving home for which childhood had been preparing them. The symbolism involved could be more powerful than the departure itself.

Saying goodbye was also a time of anticipated new beginnings for these students. Bellah et al. (1996) wrote of an additional way to think about leave taking, “Leaving home in a sense involves a kind of second birth in which we give birth to ourselves” (p. 50). As students learned that taking leave of family and community required greater focus inward, depending on themselves and growing more self-confident, they did, in a sense, give birth to a new and capable individual of promise.

### Leaving Family

It is no small contradiction to human nature to leave one's home.

*Navarette*

The word *familiarity* is derived from *family* in Old French, meaning “that which is familiar” (Morris, 1985). Leaving family inherently addresses the issue of leaving all that is familiar to us. The emotions involved in saying goodbye can run deep. These respondents expressed intense feelings for their families and were candid in voicing gratitude for providing them with abundant support. These students seemed to recognize the tensions inherent in individualism: a desire to personally succeed contrasted with the sense of a common good, the sense that belonging to a system greater than oneself is important.

Saying goodbye to family could be a time of extensive redefinition. Bellah et al. (1996) wrote of the ever changing and strong ties that bind us to our families. “Though the issues of separation, individuation, and leaving home come to a head in late adolescence, they are recurrent themes in the lives of Americans, and few if any of us ever leave them entirely behind” (p. 37). For each of these students, leaving home was perhaps the most significant farewell up until this point in their lives. For most of the students, boarding the plane at the airport was the hardest time. Adrienne expressed the emotions involved:

It was a really tough time, you know, thinking that I was going to be gone for a year, and packing for that. I think I must have taken only two suitcases, and I was really looking forward to a good time, but apprehensive.

Saying goodbye to family seemed to be a catalyst for deeper analysis and introspection that can be characteristic of international travels.

### Leaving Community

Be brave enough to live creatively. The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You cannot get there by bus, only by hard work, risking and by not quite knowing what you are doing. What you will discover will be wonderful; yourself.

*Alan Alda*

As Alan Alda alludes, often it is through leaving a community of familiarity that one knows the self better. Although leaving their community of friends was a challenging task, students seemed considerably more comfortable saying goodbye to their friends than to their families. Though leaving their friends was a somber occasion, they also were very focused on the journey ahead.

There was a sense of excitement brewing in the respondents; they were eager to venture out to explore and create their own distinct paths in life. For the respondents, it was more difficult to say goodbye to the friends made while abroad after only a few months than the initial leave taking of one's community and childhood friends. Cameron echoed the sense of everyone when he expressed how difficult it was for him to say goodbye to those he met while in Germany.

When you take off for some place else, you leave your friends and family here. But it's for a year, and you know you're going to come back to them and see them all again. But when you go abroad and then you have to go back home, you don't know when you're going to see everyone else again.

Students coped with leave taking in different ways. Kim was so overwhelmed by the idea of leaving that she seemed to deny it as long as possible.

It wasn't until I stepped off the plane and felt the heat of Africa on me and all of a sudden I was just, 'Wow. This is real. I'm here' . . . it was a very intense experience.



In her case, she actually arrived in Africa before she went through the process of leave taking. In the beginning it was difficult for her to adjust to her new environment, perhaps because she had not come to grips with the fact that she had left home. Leaving family and community was a significant step, enabling these students to develop a greater sense of self-efficacy. Departures, though always heart-rending, seemed to be a natural and integral part of the international educational experience.

### Passage

All growth is a leap in the dark; a spontaneous premeditated act without the benefit of experience.

*Henry Miller*

The word passage can bring to mind images such as the Panama Canal or the Straits of Gibraltar. However, passage, as referred to here, is much more than a physical place, it is more even than the act of passing from one country to another. The word “passage,” derived from Old English, referred to the transition from one way of being to another (Morris, 1985). Studying abroad seemed to be a significant “passage” experience for these students. And while the physical passing beyond one’s own borders afforded these students opportunities to see new shores, it was the mental, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional aspects of the transition that allowed for developmental growth and transformation.

### Fear of the Unknown

What gives value to travel is fear. It is the fact that, at a certain moment, when we are so far from our own country . . . we are seized by a vague fear, and the distinctive desire to go back to the protection of old habits. This is the most obvious benefit of travel. At that moment, we are feverish, but also porous, so that the slightest touch makes us quiver to the depths of our being.

*Albert Camus*

The anticipation of the unfamiliar has been a theme of writers for years. For Gillian, this fear of the unknown, the feverish state to which Camus refers, actually manifested itself through sickness. She said,

I was so scared. The first weekend I was just sick to my stomach. I met my family, it was a family stay . . . So I stayed with this family and the first weekend I was sick, just sick to my stomach, plus an eight hour time change and I was nervous . . . I drank apple juice for the weekend and I just laid in bed because they didn't speak English at all, and my French was good book-wise, but I had never had that much experience actually speaking it, and I was just scared. I was just scared out of my mind.

Some call it the fear of the unknown, others cite the excitement and thrill of adrenaline, and whatever the name, the fact remains that while periods of transition are tremendous opportunities for growth, they can also be very unsettling times that may encourage moments of deep introspection. It is during times of transition when it is often possible to see the innermost part of the self. The novelist Michael Crichton (1988) wrote,

Often I feel I go to some distant region of the world to be reminded of who I really am. There is no mystery about why this should be so. Stripped of your ordinary surroundings, your friends, your daily routines . . . you are forced into direct experience. Such direct experience inevitably makes you aware of who it is that is having the experience. That is not always comfortable, but it is always invigorating. (p. xii)

Another way that fear of the unknown was manifested was through language competency. Perceived language competency can significantly aid or impede one's transition into a new culture. Often, it seemed, the fear was that one's language competency would not be adequate to communicate, as Gillian referred to above. Students reacted to this apprehension in different ways. Gillian got sick. Cassie, on the other hand, had years of language training in the United States and so in a manner characteristic of her upbeat personality, jumped right into her time in Mexico with both feet. In rapid words and grand gesticulations she spoke.

You learn a new language, right? So, I got super excited about learning Spanish, right? And I'm very outspoken and talk all the time, right? So I get there and I'm just saying as much as I can with the words I know. Small vocabulary, lots of things you want to say. People would kind of be looking at me and laughing. One of my sisters told me, 'Be careful what you say', and we came to find out that a lot of the words have double meanings, so you have to be really careful what you say, because you know, and they thought it was so funny when we did that.

So I would talk talk talk all the time. Totally not making sense probably most of the time. And my other friend Theresa, she didn't really talk very much. It was really weird because as we kept going, I started to realize that what I was saying didn't always make sense. So then I kind of stopped talking. So I kind of came into this time when I wasn't talking, and I wasn't really talking as much and I wasn't really understanding either. So it was kind of a confusing time. And then toward the end, it sort of evened out . . . the cycle was so weird.

Cassie's experience highlights an interesting progression of language use.

Adrienne took a much more methodical approach to conquering her fear of language insufficiency. In October she decided to go to Germany the following summer. She enrolled in German language classes as soon as possible. In Germany, she enrolled at the Goethe Institute, a language institute, for summer session classes in order to acquire skills for successful matriculation at Heidelberg University in the fall.

On the twenty-fifth of May, she boarded a plane in Chicago, feeling apprehensive. Decked out in bright red cowboy boots purchased especially for her trip, she felt conspicuous, was very nervous, and didn't sleep at all. When her host family met her at the airport and spoke to her, she "could hardly respond back in German." The fear of the unknown can be so dramatic as to cause even linguistic paralysis, as Adrienne experienced.

In contrast to Cassie's desire to utilize all the words in her vocabulary to express ideas, Adrienne addressed her fear of the unknown by reading and studying long hours in order to understand what others were saying, and then listening, rather than speaking, in order to get along in her new environment.

### Expectations

The bits of prior knowledge students accumulated before departing seemed to influence their reactions to foreign cultures. It is the acquisition of these assumptions that is addressed in the following section.

Some intercultural program literature addresses pre-departure priming as a way to maximize student experiences (Laubscher, 1994; Paige, 1986), assisting them in making personal, social, and academic adjustments. In this study, pre-departure preparation did seem to help these students understand their environments a bit better and diffuse some stereotypes. However, these students seemed to have preconceived notions of people who were not like them that no amount of research could dispel. These fragmented, and often erroneous ideas about the other filtered their views of and reactions to the stimulus they encountered.

## Stereotypes

One might expect that an inverse relationship would exist between pre-departure research and stereotypes—that research would invoke more open-mindedness about cultural mores (Kauffman, 1983). On one level, education did seem to help challenge and dispel stereotypes. Philosophically, the more knowledge one gains on a certain topic, the more likely an encounter with contrasting opinions of the same ideas is to take place, allowing for the development of critical thinking skills. The entire Semester at Sea program at the University of Pittsburgh is based on this view. I garnered this information (1998) from their web page:

The shipboard curriculum provides you with a series of insights into various societies and allows you to dissect and assess what you observe. Not only will you develop the ability to understand new cultures as they are encountered, but you will also gain the intellectual tools that will allow you to relate past experiences to future situations.

Semester at Sea participants spend their time at sea acquiring information about the country in which the ship will harbor next. After gaining a basic knowledge of facts about a country, students then spend time in that country, being more efficient, the hope is, in making meaning from their experiences in the country.

This idea, while meritorious, seemed to be an only partially adequate practice for the respondents in this study. While education did dispel some stereotypes, others were not altered, regardless of the amount of time spent researching their destinations. Those stereotypes seemed to only be more eloquently articulated and deep-rooted. Students spoke of their stereotypes with passion. For example, late one night Adrienne was waiting at a train station to return home.

It was dark, nine o'clock at night. I went up to the platform where I was to be leaving from for the next train, and I just decided to wait there for an hour. It was outside. And I hadn't been sitting but ten minutes on a bench on the platform when two Turkish men came up the escalator, all dressed in black. Both of them wore black turbans and black leather jackets and black jeans and black boots. And had dark faces. I wouldn't have worried too much except I was a woman and I was alone and I had a backpack. I looked like a prime target for these two gentlemen. They came up and one sat on one side of me and the other sat on the other side of me . . . They moved in and squeezed me so I could not move my arms . . . They took out cigarettes and lit them and blew the smoke in my face . . . And I really honestly thought I had come to the end . . . I thought "Oh my word, I'm going to die" . . . So I slowly got up and walked to the end of the platform and they both watched me but they didn't follow me. and I prayed and said, "Lord, I really want to go at least see my mom and dad before I die." I was so scared.

Adrienne's stereotypes seemed to be confirmed by the men's questionable behavior. Sonora, in France, also had a negative encounter on public transportation.

I was on this bus and this guy—well, first of all, you are NEVER supposed to smile at a guy. Never. Because it shows you are interested. And this was an Arab guy, so it makes it even worse. And so I just happened to be standing next to him on the bus. And he said, "Oh, where have you come from?" I said, "I was just at the movies" . . . and so we started talking about this movie. Ok. And so, then it was my stop and he wanted to get off and follow me home . . . I said, "Err, no!" you know? And so he, well he got off, I mean, there's no way I could stop him from getting off the bus. And so I went to the grocery store, because there's one real close by, thinking, you know? I said, "I've got to go get something from the grocery store, so you might as well just go, because I'm going to be a while." [He said,] "Well, I can wait for you. I want to walk you home." Ok. So. Yeah, he followed me all around the grocery store then. I finally shook him off, but it took a while.

Sonora, like Adrienne, did not give any substantial reason why she held her strong perceptions. They only cited experiences that supported, rather than disconfirmed previously held ideas. Their responses to their situations seemed to be filtered through lenses based on the combination of stereotypes and actual encounters.

### Previous Experiences

Adrienne's father works for John Deere. He had been an international business traveler ever since she could remember. In fact, her German host father, Heinz, was a John Deere business associate of her father's. Their families been friends for years, so Adrienne was delighted when he invited her to live with them for a year while she pursued German studies in Mannheim.

She was not the first one in her family to take advantage of the international connections their father's career offered.

My brother got a job in Ireland working for another family that my dad knew through John Deere . . . so we flew over for three weeks, my sister and I. It was phenomenal. They are very laid back . . . they met in the local pub every night and talked about things and just relaxed, and it was a totally stress-free atmosphere . . . [we] had a great time hiking and traveling.

The activities of her father and the positive experience with the Irish community in which her brother worked instilled in her an enthusiasm for international encounters, and an eagerness to spend time abroad.

Gillian's first remembrance of international exposure was not through formal travel, per se, but rather through interaction with a foreign exchange student from her high school.

Some friends of the family were hosting an exchange student from Germany, and I remember meeting her. She came over one day and we played Trivial Pursuit and that was cool. She was so smart. We played Trivial Pursuit in English and she won! She beat my parents and I was like, "Wow, that's amazing!"

Her awe of this foreign exchange student's intellectual capacity inspired in her own education an inquisitiveness about cultural differences. This desire to learn about other cultures eventually led her to France for study and travel.

The basis for Cameron's expectations differed from other respondents'. He had, perhaps, a sense of competition with his father; during his childhood he had often heard stories of his father's travels.

My father went to Korea; he was in the Army. He went there for a few years. And when he got back he started traveling around the world, but got caught in Australia for two years and didn't move on . . . so he travels every few years, either to France or Australia to visit friends. My mom sort of gets left out. She's only been to Hawaii . . . she regretted not being able, well, not really regretted, because she never really had the opportunity. But she knew that we did and that if we wanted to do it we should take advantage of the opportunities . . . my dad's got a lot of stories, which he never tells, my mom tells them to me, from all his travels and stuff. She didn't know him back then, but I guess she's heard a lot of them. So I always think of what my dad has done and then I think I've got to do something a little bit better.

The students' previous experiences with international affairs were diverse, but each helped create a set of expectations based on bits and pieces of knowledge that would influence their times abroad.

### Host Families

Three of the seven respondents lived with host families. The expectations students and host families had of each other played a large part in the overall satisfaction—or discontent—with being abroad. Setting rules by which any family unit abides can be a challenging task, and adding a multicultural component requires a delicate amalgamation of communication, statement of values, patience, and unconditional positive regard. Some families were more successful than others in achieving peaceful cohabitation.

Whether these students had a congenial time or struggled to get by with their host families seemed to depend in large part on their perceptions and anticipation of their



freedom. In this study, those who had the fewest expectations seemed to get along better and abide by family norms. Each experience was different. Sonora, for example, wanted to integrate with a family, creating all her social contacts through them. As a result, she felt at home and integrated with her family as if she had known them all her life. Cassie, however, made friends through school and community activities and expected to have the same types of freedoms of association she had in the United States. Her cultural ideals clashed with those of her host mother. A troublesome relationship with her family ensued, though she chose to remain with them through her semester in Mexico. Adrienne's story was similar, but with a different outcome. In a most unfortunate situation, Adrienne returned to the United States seven months early because of the difficult relationship that she had with her host parents.

The interactions a student has with a host family, negative or positive, comprise perhaps the most intimate tie for students abroad. In this study, all three of the students who stayed with host families were women. For those who had grown up experiencing a great deal of freedom in the United States, like Cassie, it contributed to some frustration.

My family situation [in Mexico] wasn't quite...ideal. I had two sisters and a mom and she was divorced and they were kind of a lower-class family. Most of the host families were very wealthy, so this was kind of a little different. Which didn't bug me because as long as I had somewhere to sleep, food, kind of close to school, I was fine with it...I shared a room with a girl who is a year younger than I am. And she was really really sweet...My mom was fairly strict. She had a curfew of ten o'clock on weeknights and two o'clock on weekends. Which usually I'd be super okay with. But in the Mexican setting, and especially just because we were only there a semester, I found myself getting home from two o'clock to three o'clock every day of the week...that made my mom kind of upset. And so then things were kind of stressful.

I was kind of rebelling. It wasn't really, but kind of, because I'd never had rules like that...I'd never been in a group of friends like that before...they could

play the guitar so they'd sing and stuff...so we just hung out all the time. Which was really fun.

I was like, "Who's she to tell me?" I mean, I know she was my mom, but it kind of evened out. I know that it was kind of stressful for my mom. I don't know. I'm sure she worried sometimes. But I was like, "Well, I'm going to spend time with my friends while I can."

Cassie was placed with her host family through the school she attended. Sonora, however, found her host family at her home institution. A couple from France was visiting her institution and needed a translator for an opera performance.

The professor said...one of them had kind of a desperate look on his face and said, "Please, will you take them? I don't want to go!" And I said, "Yeah, that would be great!" So after two years of French, I was trying to tell them what was going on. Because it was all in English, you know. And so we hit it off really well. They are a retired couple, and they said, "If you ever come to France, stay with us." They had taken in a lot of foreign exchange students, probably twenty or so. But they had decided...two years before I got there not to take any more. Because they were getting older and just wanted their own life. But they asked me to come to their house anyways, even though they had decided not to. And so we got along so well.

Her relationship with her host family was, in comparison to the others in this study, extraordinary. During our interview, as Sonora was showing her photographs, we came upon a picture of her host family.

Now this is the area [host parents] moved out to. They waited until the end of the school year, though, so that, well, they wanted to move in the summer anyway, but they didn't want to have to transport me in and out of town to go to school. They would have done it though. Because they were going to move and I said, "Well, I'm going to look for another place to stay." And they said, "No you are not. We will drive you in to school every day."

I commented that her host family situation seemed fortunate and she replied,

That is so true. There were people who were just miserable because they didn't like their families that they were staying with.

Sonora spent a great deal of time with her host family (playing games, babysitting the relatives of her host family, celebrating special occasions). She was eager to learn all she could about French culture. Enculturation can be easier perhaps, when the students are willing to accept the cultural expectations of the host country—even if those expectations are contrary to the tenets of the student's own beliefs.

Adrienne seemed to be one of those students to whom Sonora had referred as being miserable. Adrienne's host family situation in Germany was less than ideal. It became apparent after a few days that the host mother was xenophobic and had only agreed to host an exchange student because of her husband's wishes. Peaceful cohabitation became impossible and Adrienne ended up returning to the United States seven months early.

### Friendships

Another area where expectation influenced behavior was in making friends. Many of the students arrived in a country expecting to make interpersonal connections immediately, unaware of the extended length of time it can take to make friends. Much has been written on the United States patterns of friendship because the cultural mores are distinctly different from those of some other cultures. Foreigners often perceive relationships in the United States as quick, superficial, and trite. "American friendship is based on spontaneity, mutual attraction, and warm personal feelings . . . an American friend may refer to anyone from a passing acquaintance to a lifetime intimate" (Stewart & Bennett, 1991, pp. 100-101). Because of this striking difference in interpersonal culture standards, students found themselves redefining their expectations and, in the process,

perhaps learning more about emotions such as loneliness and patience. Making friends seemed to be a daunting task that required diligence. For Sonora, it took over three months before she was accepted into a group of friends.

It is hard to get in. But once you meet one person and they are your friend, then you meet all their friends and then, no big deal.

Connecting with this French group afforded her great insight into the French and United States modes of managing interpersonal relationships.

One of my professor friends says that friendship can be compared to an onion. Here in America, it is real easy to peel off the outside layers, and the inside is pretty hard. Whereas in France, it is real hard to get through those outside layers, but once you're in, it's all soft. I like that comparison because it's really true.

Making friends can be a challenging task for a student abroad. For Sonora, the process of making friends abroad necessitated a deeper look at cultural patterns of friendship.

I know we have a lot of acquaintances, and I think that is why we make the distinction...because we call everybody our friend here. You know, like, "Oh yeah, went out with friends last night" but you really know them from class and that's it. Whereas there, well already the distinction between *tu* and *vous* [exists]. As soon as somebody calls you *tu*, you're pretty special to them. Because that's a really familiar way of addressing someone. And so it's just like, "Wow." So I have maybe twenty people who say *tu* to me. And so those are my friends. I mean real friends. Everybody else says *vous*...It's a really neat distinction. And it's reassuring almost. Because you know how to act in certain situations. You know who you can tell certain things to, just by the *tu*. That's all it takes.

Understanding the different cultural norms affecting interpersonal relationships seemed to aid students tremendously in meeting friends.

### Finances

Finances may dramatically impact student expectations. The availability of finances affected the perceptions of the students in this study with respect to what was

possible (and impossible) when abroad. Students are often on a shoestring budget, and financial constraints can be a looming concern. Financial freedom, to certain degree, provides students with options. It can help students in tight situations find more effective alternatives. For example, Adrienne's host family situation became unbearable, but because she had already paid the fee for the second two months and was unable to get a refund, she felt trapped in a situation that was causing her tremendous emotional stress. She felt, in her own words, "very alone." Her greatest desire was to remain and attend classes at the university in Heidelberg, but because she saw no viable options to stay, she returned early to the United States. She felt she couldn't survive with both her sanity and her host family. Finances served only to complicate matters.

Apartments in Heidelberg are about \$1000 a month. The equivalent of \$1000 a month. And I couldn't afford it. I told my teacher at the Institute I couldn't live there [host family's house]. So she said, 'Well we can find you some room at the Goethe Institute dorm.' I said, 'I can't pay the bills. And I wouldn't have any money for food.' I just didn't have that much.

At this point, Adrienne, in a harried and bedraggled state, could only see one option: returning home. If, from the outset, she had felt financially able to find other living accommodations, her anxiety—and by extension her experience—in Germany may have had a different outcome.

### Creating Stories or Experiences

Finally, student expectations of experiences abroad affected the types of activities and behavior in which they engaged. Those who sought to create stories to tell others upon return seemed to be more allocentric, while those whose desire it was to create memories tended to engage in more psychocentric activities. For example, Cameron's

activities were motivated by a wish to have stories that would “top” his father’s. Kim on the other hand, took the more reflective stance, desiring to absorb everything at once and make sense of it later. The expectations the students held greatly influenced the experiences while abroad. One stance did not appear better than another did; rather it just influenced the types of experiences students had while abroad.

### Arrivals

There is naught better than to be with noble souls in company.  
*Mahabharata*

Arrival on foreign shores did not always mark an ending to the process of transition, but it did seem to characterize the beginning of a new set of experiences for these students. Therefore, this next section is organized around a few of the common issues the students in this study encountered after arriving at their destinations. The students all seemed to undergo a period of acclimation that was marked by exhaustion and a heightened awareness of their surroundings. Piaget and Inhelder (1958) asserted that individual change and maturation occur in “periods of discontinuity, displacement, and disjunction” (p. 246). This period, then, was ideal for promoting change and introspection. When they were abroad, the students also exhibited strong needs to understand, affiliate, and make meaning from their experiences. This section concludes with attention to issues such as language fluency and encounters with intolerance.

### Acclimation

The respondents, as they reflected on their experiences, seemed to remember the first day or two abroad with exceptional clarity. That time seemed to be etched in their minds, characterized by apprehension and intense exhaustion. Personalities also seemed

to affect the process by which students acclimated. Gillian, as mentioned earlier, responded to this feeling of overwhelming emotion by staying in bed for the whole first weekend, drinking nothing but apple juice and hiding away from her new environment. Adrienne's response fell on the opposite end of the spectrum. Her nerves were still providing her the fortitude to push on, so she spent her first afternoon orienting herself with her family and the area, looking at maps and bus charts and train charts of the town, then toured her town and the neighboring town where she was to attend the university. Cameron's approach was different yet as he spent those first few days engaged in meticulous reasoning, focusing on the necessities of finding a place to live and setting up a bank account. His survival instincts dominated, requiring all other senses to withdraw to the background for a time.

Once I got done worrying about the day-to-day things, I could actually enjoy what was going on. If you don't know where you can get money, where to buy your food, how your parents can get a hold of you, where to register for classes, if you don't know any of that, you can't enjoy anything else because you're constantly worrying about it.

This same state of disequilibrium may occur whenever anyone moves from familiar surroundings—whether domestically or internationally. This time can be extraordinarily unsettling and frightening. People react differently to the combination of fear and the overstimulation of senses, often withdrawing within themselves, reverting to a basic level of communication grounded in the values and ideals of their homelands. Ryan, for example, told of his first week in Germany,

The first two weeks of being over there was a nightmare. We got off the train in Frankfurt and were going to spend the night at a youth hostel in Frankfurt. We got there, stuck our stuff in a locker and I got all my travelers checks stolen. So I was running around making phone calls trying to get the checks replaced. I actually

got to Jena on a Saturday and everything was closed and the place we were supposed to get our keys was closed too.

There was an office we had to go to go pick up our keys and that was closed so we didn't have any way to get to our housing. So we ended up spending Saturday night and Sunday night in the Holiday Inn because we didn't have anywhere else to go. And I'm calling back to [my university] and nobody was there and I finally did get a hold of somebody and I was like, We're standing here in the middle of the rain and it's ten o'clock at night. Fix it! Do something! And they couldn't. They didn't have a clue about what was going on.

So we got to the Holiday Inn and I just remember being so upset. I'm calling room service and saying, "Bring me a beer, bring me dinner. I want some alcohol and I want some food. I've been on planes and trains for the past thirty-six hours and I don't want to worry about anything. Just put it on the bill. I don't care, I'll pay in the morning."

We may be able to relate to Ryan's feelings of frustration and desire for others to make amends for the situation. This is another lesson the students learned early: they had to depend on themselves for answers. Cultural sensitivity was also important if they were going to get along in the new climate. This initial period of disequilibrium—though it seemed go on forever—eventually passed. It, after time, gave way to a deeper sense of self and one's own internal capabilities. The acute realization of self-reliance periodically subsided for Cameron, but never quite left him. In Germany he wrote in his journal during a time when he was sick:

The only part that really sucks about being away from home is being sick and not having anyone to comfort you. I only have a cold, but that's bad enough.

Sonora also mentioned the process of becoming more self-reliant. She had difficulty following the bureaucratic process necessary to get a work permit. However, if she was to work, she knew she had to figure it out alone. No one she knew could give her advice. A side effect of self-reliance was that these students seemed to become more



used to loneliness. When students were abroad, their “needs” became more accentuated. The initial need to understand is presented next.

### The Need to Understand

In 1968, Abraham Maslow outlined a five tiered pyramidal hierarchy of needs, maintaining that human beings are motivated first by physiological needs and as those are fulfilled, they may move upward toward self-actualization. Just one year later, Bowlby (1969) researched touch deprivation in infants and found that even as young babies, contact with others is crucial for survival; humans are social creatures by nature. To add to these two researchers’ ideas of human imperatives, a third might be added. D’Aquila (1979) calls the need to impose some sort of order on our perceptions of the world a “cognitive imperative.” This need transcends cultural boundaries; it is a universal human experience that requires us to organize the myriad of stimuli that reach us daily. Although d’Aquila was not a cultural anthropologist, his research has great implications for those who encounter differences. Humans are, by nature, endowed with a need to understand and this need appears to be pronounced for those who are abroad. This need to understand was often expressed through making sense of language.

### Language

All the students in this study save one had prior formal exposure to language learning. Although these students had many motivators for travel, language was ostensibly cited as the primary reason for study abroad. Those who had higher levels of proficiency tended to find friends and become enculturated more quickly. All, though, felt lonely from time to time. Loneliness is an interesting bedfellow for travelers. At the

same time, travelers can both relish in the feeling of being totally anonymous on the planet while despising the utter loneliness that accompanies the solitude. This generation of students, GenXers, as they have been called, has been so inculcated with visual images and noises that it can be difficult for students to sit in peace and listen to the quietness of their souls (see Coupland, 1991; Howe, Strauss, & Williams, 1993; Loeb, 1994; Moffatt, 1989; Sacks, 1996; Strauss & Howe, 1992, for further information on Generation X). Coping with solitude is not usually positively emphasized in the United States. From childhood, the social reward systems are structured around positive interactions with others—only when children do something wrong are they sent to spend time in solitude. Being alone, though, seemed to lead to deeper insights into these respondents' own psyches, shedding light on what they were "made of." One tool used by students to evaluate their experiences was journal writing. For two of the respondents, keeping a journal was a mandatory exercise from their home institutions.

Although speaking a language opened worlds of knowledge and experiences, a secondary result of language fluency cited by the students in this study was power. Knowledge yielded control in situations. As a high school student, Sonora became acquainted with the power inherent in understanding another language.

In January 1992 I went down to Mexico for ten days. And it was great. Because I had all these adults in my power. They needed me.

For Sonora, the power of translation afforded her a position of indispensability that was gratifying. The students in this study seemed to need to understand what was going on around them. Cassie, for example, said,

When I went to Spain, I was one of the few people who even knew Spanish. High school Spanish . . . and so, I was everyone's translator, but it drove me crazy when I didn't know what people were telling me in Spanish . . . And so, I think that was what really drove me to learn Spanish. So I can understand people.

There were, however, other ways student sought to understand their environments. Language, though a useful tool, was not the only tool with which they were equipped. The next section addresses the flip side of fluency and how those without language proficiency found a degree of understanding.

### The Flip Side of Fluency

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything, it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few.

*Suzu Kiroshi*

Finding patterns in the chaos of cultural stimuli need not be done solely through language communication. Humans are creatures with multiple senses and construct meaning from all of them. By presuming that language expertise serves as the primary means of gaining cultural insight, students may miss some of the deeper subtleties of a culture. Kim, for example, went to Ghana as part of a cooperative agricultural venture. Observing and working at a nutrition center in town and on the farms gave her an opportunity to watch and learn from the villagers. She felt a special kinship with the people who had been so kind to her. She also had no language competency. While we were looking at pictures from her trip, her voice suddenly became softer as she spoke of the core group of farmers with whom she worked,

I felt a special connection with this group. They just took care of me like you wouldn't believe. And they reminded me of a lot of people—I don't know if I did this so I could have some sort of familiarity or something—but I could see people I knew in them, you know?

Although she didn't articulate it in the same way, this "familiarity" she sought may illustrate what d'Aquili referred to as the cognitive imperative presented earlier. Kim lacked any knowledge of the Tui language before she went, so she spent a great deal of time watching and pantomiming. She sat with the farmers, night after night, sharing magazines and stories. The experiences she had in Ghana were also insightful, simply incorporated different ways of understanding.

Her time at the nutrition center was helpful in allowing her cultural access into the norms of her village. Many of the children who came to the center were extreme cases. The mothers had walked miles as a last resort to help their children. She pointed to a picture and said, "I sat right over here a lot of the time and just listened and watched and stuff."

The understanding she gained was different because of her inability to communicate well in any language other than English. However, the experience still seemed to hold meaning for her. Because she was forced to rely on non-verbal cues, she engaged in listening and watching more than the other respondents did. She seemed to watch without any expectations. Stitsworth's (1987) study seemed to validate the value of approaching study abroad as Kim did. He found that students (a) who had never been abroad, (b) whose family members had never been abroad, (c) who had the lowest expectations, and (d) had the lowest levels of language skills exhibited the highest degree of personality change. This was because they were more open, with all their senses, to experiences. Jamake Highwater (1995) told this story:

You must learn to look at the world twice. First, you must bring your eyes together in front so you can see each droplet of rain on the grass, so you can see the smoke rising from an anthill in the sunshine. Nothing should escape your notice. But you must learn to look again, with your eyes at the very edge of what is visible. Now you must see dimly, if you wish to see things that are dim—visions, mist, and cloud people, animals which hurry past you in the dark. You must learn to look at the world twice if you wish to see all there is to see (p. 62).

Seeing “dimly,” as Highwater put it, can be obscured, by mental concentration on verb conjugation and vocabulary recall. For one who is in a safe environment and is predisposed to self-reflection and inquiry, having limited language capabilities may invite meaningful development.

Often language is seen in a different light when students are abroad. Cameron wrote in his journal about a conversation he had with Connie, a German classmate.

Connie came over tonight and we talked for a while on the balcony. I thought she had an interesting point. She said that she'd love to hear German for once without understanding it. She told me she thinks languages sound so much different when you don't understand what is being said. When she was younger, she used to hear English and thought it sounded like someone was talking with a huge wad of gum in their mouth. Now that she understands it, it doesn't sound like that anymore. I remember that before I knew German it sounded really weird, but now it sounds normal. So I'd like to hear English once without understanding it. I think that's an interesting way to look at it.

Cameron's musings may be different from the ones in which United States college students daily engage. It may be possible that something exceptional can happen while someone is alone in a new world, thinking without distraction (or perhaps distracted without thinking). It can be a deeply insightful time, providing a solitary time for reflection hitherto unavailable in their lives. When minds are released from the daily task of making meaning from verbal fragments because they do not understand the phrases, it seems that they may have new energy for contemplation. It appears that

paradigms may shift, creating a new energy of understanding. All life forms have moments of extraordinary vigor, even atoms. Electrons follow a standard pattern around the nucleus, keeping to their assigned rings of energy. John Smith (personal communication, Spring 1997) says that every now and again, an electron, in a moment of elevated energy, will jump out a ring to follow a path of increased energy for a time. These moments are referred to as “objective moments,” and can occur in all living bodies. There are times when we, like excited electrons, jump with renewed energy to an outer ring of existence and evaluate the remarkable uncommonality of our common lives. We often have extraordinary insights before returning to a normal state of affairs in our customary ring of existence. It is in this outer ring of perception that it is possible to have a sense of both the extraordinary and ordinary in daily living.

Indisputably, there is only a certain level to which cultural understanding may be acquired through nonverbal communication. Language skill provides considerable insight and some concepts simply cannot be grasped without meaningful vocabulary. But we should recognize that language is not the only avenue for understanding. In releasing ourselves from the notion that all understanding springs from language, it is possible that we may find value in the lack of language fluency. It is worth considering the possibility that students may become more attuned to the idiosyncrasies of those in their midst by not understanding the spoken language. One’s other senses can be heightened, allowing for concentration on the unspoken nuances of a culture. Keenly observing the dynamics in a room, the sounds and smells of an area, the flavors of the air and the food, the distribution of tasks, the gestures and voice inflections of men and women, and how

people interact can provide valuable insight into the cultural norms of a society. Total mute perception of a culture can be observed with intentional mindfulness that can create important insight into a culture.

### Xenophobia

The need to fit in, to understand a culture enough to be inconspicuous within it, was something the students in this study desired. It could be draining to stick out all the time. Sonora told a story of how she was mistaken for a French citizen while shopping and how wonderful it felt, as if she had “arrived.” She was elated. She finally fit in. It takes time to fit into another culture and during that time one is usually quite conspicuous.

Prejudice was something these students seemed to be unprepared to encounter. Coming face to face with hatred was terrifying. At one moment during Cameron’s interview, he began to talk about an intimate encounter with prejudice. His voice dropped, and he said that in Germany it was important to be careful about the right-wing movement, referring to skinheads. He encountered the three brothers of hatred, prejudice, and violence first-hand. While riding home on a streetcar one evening Cameron was physically assaulted by an intoxicated skinhead because he was recognized as from the United States. While the experience was not seriously injurious to him physically, emotionally, a stroke of lightning had left a ragged slash. The incident provided him with an opportunity to appraise the nature of prejudice.

For a while I was like, well, I didn’t want to be there. It was hard to deal with the fact that I was studying a language that I loved but these people hated me because I was not German. And not so much the fact that I was attacked by this guy, because there are people like that everywhere, even the US, who hate foreigners.

But the fact that even the people who didn't hate foreigners really didn't seem to care. The other people on the streetcar just sort of sat there and watched, didn't say anything. One guy was laughing. The guy driving the streetcar . . . just came up . . . and didn't do anything.

This incident affected his behavior for the remainder of his time in Germany. He tried not to ride the Strassenbahn late at night or ride by himself. The skinhead who had attacked him lived on the same street, so they continued to run into each other. In his journal, Cameron wrote,

One night, we were waiting for the Strassenbahn that runs back to our place. As we were waiting, Simona saw a couple of skin-head girls nearby, and noticed that one of them handed a pistol to a guy—the one who had attacked me a couple of months ago. There was one other guy with them, and we got very nervous. Because of that, we ended up taking a taxi instead of the Strassenbahn. Right now we can't go out at all without feeling nervous and wondering if we'll get attacked.

When he asked one of his German teachers about it, she and her husband doubted that the gun was indeed real. He was not mollified, writing,

I was upset by the fact that they were downplaying the incident. It's like telling someone who has been in a car wreck that they shouldn't get nervous when the road is slippery.

The wisdom procured by encountering intense, brutal, and misguided passion was bought at a high emotional price. Cameron left much of his naivete in Germany when he returned to the United States.

Adrienne knew something of the cost of rapprochement through physical vengeance as well. The pain she felt from her host mother's xenophobic attitude turned inward, finding its embodiment through disturbed consumption and sleeping patterns.

I wasn't eating well. I lost so much weight. I walked a lot, but I just didn't eat . . . I was just crushing underneath all this stress. Margaret would holler, she would go off on a hollering streak every day, and I just couldn't do it anymore . . .



it was an experience in my life that I'll never forget . . . I had a lot of stomach problems when I came back. It was hard for me not to think about it and move on.

She echoed Cameron's difficulty in separating the intellectual task of language acquisition from the fervent recollections of the people she encountered speaking that same language.

I kept up with my German courses here, and it was hard for me to go there every day and think about other things . . . it's kind of put a damper on my desire, but yet I realize that not all Germans are that way . . . there are a bunch of gross Americans and good Germans too.

The utter terror of an encounter with unchecked prejudice at best serves as a conduit for understanding universal human capabilities; at worst it can be completely disabling. Experiences such as these can bypass both the heart and mind and go straight to the soul. Making sense of them can be a complicated task that can be difficult to explain rationally. It appeared to be an enigmatic situation for these students: a challenge not to assign displaced loathing to a people or culture for individual infliction of pain while at the same time feeling incredible gratitude for those same individuals for providing the greatest opportunities of their lives.

### The Need to Affiliate

When we boil it down, it is just us, which is why we can find an ease to our suffering through community. Having a strong community with which to affiliate allows us to take more risks . . . it gives us the piece of mind to do things we thought we were incapable of doing.

*Bellah et al.*

The need for supportive community that Bellah et al. (1996) speak of can be accentuated for students abroad who have left their comfortable surroundings. Placement in a host family can help fill that need for affiliation, and, provided the family

environment is a caring one, can also assist students in maximizing their experiences and provide an opportunity to help them make meaning from their encounters.

For students whose living situation did not include a host family, the need for affiliation had to be found elsewhere. Many of the students in this study found their way to bars and pubs, perhaps because those environments could be most conducive in establishing relationships.

### Alcohol

Each student mentioned alcohol during the interview. They mentioned that their attitudes toward alcohol and their consumption patterns changed in some way while abroad. Cassie, for example, spent one summer on a military base in Japan and the next semester in Mexico. Her attitude changed greatly in that span of time. She mentioned,

I was able to combat drinking when I was in Japan and even amongst the military people. But in Mexico it was just a way of life, and I couldn't combat that. If someone was having a birthday party, everyone drank tequila. And they would offer it to everybody, all the kids and everything . . . we had an older friend . . . who drank all the time . . . and he was like, "Why are you raising a fuss? This is my lifestyle. This is our life."

For others, the allure of consuming alcohol under age 21 in Europe was thrilling. Ryan said,

We met up with a couple of other schools along the way and did our whole thing together then. The first beer I ever had was in Germany . . . we had a lot of fun.

Kim mentioned the palm wine that was often drunk in Ghana.

This is palm wine. Very very potent stuff. You have to drink it almost straight from the tree and it's not the greatest tasting thing but you can get really hooked on it.

In this study, the students who had never imbibed and, in the case of Cassie, had strong negative feelings toward alcohol consumption, found their need for affiliation was stronger than their resolve to refrain from drinking.

### Social Groups

The nationality of those with whom the students chose to affiliate also seemed to have an effect on the speed and level of their enculturation; it certainly affected their rate of language acquisition. For Ryan and Cameron, their primary relationships were with other Americans. Their experiences were different, for example, than Sonora's, who intentionally avoided all contact with English speakers in France. In her interview, she mentioned that she didn't have any American friends there. When I asked why, she raised one eyebrow and replied,

Because I was there to study French. I mean, I knew I could come back here and speak English twenty-four hours a day, whereas I was never going to be able to speak French once I came back...there were a bunch of students from [another U.S. school]. And they are forced to go abroad for a year . . . and so they would always be doing things just themselves and always speaking English and I just didn't want to be a part of that.

Her desire to fully immerse herself in French culture led her, at a relatively early point, to feel as if the trip had become her life. Different social groups seemed to lead students to have different experiences.

### The Need to Create Experiences

The students in this study seemed to feel that their time in another country was special; they had to make the most of it. "Making the most" of the trip included sightseeing. Through this sightseeing, the respondents had a sense of awe in realizing the history and permanence of some of those sights. They seemed to think of the United

States in new terms, realizing its relative youth for the first time. A secondary way students seemed to create experiences was through their interactions with host families.

Especially for the first-time travelers, the driving need to “see things” seemed to be compelling. According to Gmelch (1997), this is common. He estimates that “travel” can occupy as much as twenty-five percent of a student’s semester or summer of study on foreign soil. He taught a summer course in Austria and part of the course requirement was to keep a journal. In the beginning, he was dismayed to see the shallow nature of the students’ activities and encounters with locals. Yet the students wrote repeatedly that they believed they were learning more from travel than from their academic coursework. When he read that the students believed great learning was occurring through taking photos of landmarks and hanging out in bars or restaurants all weekend long, he was skeptical of his students’ words. Over time though, he began to see value in traveling to create experiences in spite of its academic senselessness. He found that students learned spontaneity and adaptability through traveling with Eurail passes and finding sleeping accommodations in unpredictable places. For his students, these experiences constructed an important step in building self-confidence away from their parents and the protection of their families. Gmelch’s observations held true for the group I interviewed as well. Travelling to “see things” held different value for students than formal cultural or academic inquiry.

When Ryan told me his past travel experiences, he mentioned a two-week German trip in high school.

Junior year of high school, I went to Germany . . . it was a typical southern Germany tour. Land in Frankfurt, go to Wurttemberg, go to Neuschwanstein, you

hear all about Ludwig, you go up to Heidelberg . . . you do that little loop . . . there's a castle—quick—catch it before it flies by. I saw so many churches I thought I'd never want to go into a single church ever again. I was so sick of churches. And they all were looking the same. Honestly they were. We'd go into a church and it was, "Gosh. That looks like the same darned painting I saw twenty miles back."

Student travel, although not the primary interest of this study, did seem to be a common activity in which students engaged when abroad.

### Sense of History and Permanence

Almost 150 years ago, Marx, in the Communist Manifesto, remarked that one of the results of capitalist development was that 'all that is solid melts in air.' The claim is that the solid, lasting, often expressive objects that served us in the past are being set aside for the quick, shoddy, replaceable commodities with which we now surround ourselves.

*Charles Taylor*

When students are abroad, it may be the first time they have ever encountered buildings over two hundred years old. All the students in this study had grown up in the United States, so walking down streets and visiting cathedrals built in the twelfth century was an unusual experience. The sudden realization of history seemed to give them a heightened sense of their own places in the world. Gillian mentioned a trip with her host family to the alps one day.

We went to a friend's family's cabin and we went hiking in the alps. Amazing, amazing. I had never seen a glacier before. I mean, we don't have anything like that in this country. Not just the alps, the whole history perspective. Like, you wonder how much it affects how we behave as individuals when everything here is temporary. Build a house, forty years, tear it down, build a new one. In France they build roads around trees! They don't move trees to make roads, they go around, because it is important to them . . . I went to southern France . . . there is Roman architecture that still exists there . . . There is this one aqueduct that is a good couple of miles long, which considering it was built in like 62 BC, and we can't even build a highway that lasts over thirty years and in 62 BC, these guys were moving these big rocks around.

I took a train from Paris to somewhere and I was alone and sitting next to this old French gentleman and he was telling me his thoughts on race relationships in the United States. And he predicted that in the very near future racial tensions will become so high in the U.S. that we're going to separate. We're going to become one country of white people, one country of black people. And I don't know. We didn't talk that long, but he said, "You're a baby country. You don't know how things work." It's very interesting . . . just the fact that he thought of that was amazing.

Sonora spoke of how seeing old buildings helped her maintain her perspective in France.

There would be times when I would be walking down the streets and I would all of a sudden realize, "I'm in France. This is so cool." You know? And usually when I would see old buildings is when I would realize it. Just because when you see something that is marked thirteenth century, you're like, "whoa." We weren't even a thought yet, you know . . . but you always get acclimated eventually.

Redefining perceptions of history and hearing new perspectives seemed to enrich their time abroad.

### Host Families

Of all the relationships forged when abroad, the one with a host family can be the most intense. The four students in this study who lived with families became quite aware of the delicate relationship between learning and living in another's home. In this study, it was also the most influential relationship affecting a positive or negative notion of a culture. Host families, in a very real sense, are ambassadors for a country, creating lasting impressions on the lives of those they shelter. Cassie spoke of her initial days in Mexico.

I shared a room with the daughter who is a year younger than I am. And she was really really sweet . . . and we got along really well . . . but the older sister, I don't know what her problem was, but she was just kind of an unhappy person. And the only time she was truly happy, she had a boyfriend, and whenever he was

around, she was pleasant . . . and you could kind of tell that's just the way she was, and so . . . it was kind of an uncomfortable atmosphere.

So I wasn't at home a lot. I could have chosen to move, but I decided I was okay where I was, and even though it wasn't perfect, it was okay . . . we would be sitting at lunch and it would just be me, the older sister, and mom, and the sister would talk to the mom almost like I wasn't there. And they would talk just fast enough so that I couldn't totally follow her . . . so it was like I wasn't even in the room . . . and I felt really uncomfortable . . . I didn't feel comfortable inviting [friends over], so I was always going to someone else's place.

Most host families have an overwhelming sense of responsibility toward their houseguests. For Sonora, it was a priority of hers to become integrated into a family. She loved to spend time with them and learn their ways. We were viewing photographs and she showed me the picture of a house.

And I spent spring break out there because I was broke and I didn't have any money, and so [host parents] said, "Ok, we're just going to go park you out in the country for a week." I said, "Ok!" So I went and did some light house cleaning for them, and she stocked me up on food and they brought their grandson to stay with me for two days out there.

He still remembers that. This summer, he talked to me and he said, "Do you remember those scrambled eggs you made me?" He said, "They were gross!" I said, "Thank you! See if I ever cook for you again, buddy!" This last summer, he and I went fishing and it was a really neat time. They are so happy out there.

For Cassie and Adrienne, those feelings of affiliation did not run as deep; they had good friends with whom they wished to spend their time.

The emotional influence of interactions with host families on students cannot be overemphasized. For those who had awkward or hostile relationships with their families, it tainted their entire journeys, and left psychological and emotional wounds. Incumbent upon all who assist students in their travels abroad is a duty to inform them about the importance of host family relationships.

### Departures

Thus it is that every country to which a man has grown accustomed holds a spell over him.

*Diadorus Sioulus*

The students left the United States with passports in hand. Those documents were temporary permission slips that inherently communicated an expectation of a return home, of a steady affiliation with the United States. However, when the students left their host countries, there was no such guarantee of return. Especially for those with international friends, this departure seemed more final than had their departure from the United States. This leaving seemed to bring forth in each of them a redefinition of social circles, of family. While they anticipated departure, they seemed to yearn for dialogue with others, and yet, very few found opportunities to voice their apprehensions. At the conclusion of this section, a discussion of Adrienne's story is presented because of its distinctness from the other respondent stories.

### Leave Taking

I am a part of all that I have met.

*Alfred Lord Tennyson*

The process of saying goodbye to friends and family abroad seemed different than the first leave taking event. For one thing, the students held no delusions of reunions, timelessness, or stability. They knew it would be difficult, if not impossible to see these individuals again, and especially for those in international classrooms, their new friends, their comrades, would soon be scattered. Cassie said,

That's the hardest part about traveling. Making such great friendships. I think that's why it is easy for me to go places, but hard for me to leave them. Because I know I'm always going to come back home, but I never know if I'm every going



to go back to where I've been. And so it's hard leaving people that you've become close with. That's why I am always like, "I'm not ready to go home!" because I know I'll go home eventually. You know? And I have connections from home that are really strong and I know would never break.

Mixed with this feeling was apprehension about integration back home. This anticipation of departure was felt long before the actual departure date. Feeling displaced seemed to be a common feeling. Two months before returning to the United States, Cameron wrote in his journal,

Last night I had another one of my dreams about being home. It was the same as all the others. I was at home wishing that I was back here in Germany. I really don't want to leave. I think I'm actually starting to dread having to go home. I want to see everyone again, but I would rather stay here, at least for the moment.

Some respondents spent time reminiscing about friendships. At this time, the artificial intimacy of friendships became more apparent. Cameron mused,

I was wondering if the friends I have would still be my friends if I met them while studying in their home countries. For example, if I had gone to study in Spain and had met Andrea and the others in Spain, I wonder what the chances are that we'd become good friends. I don't think the chances are very good. I think that there is a link that bonds international students together. And if you're in your home country, there's less of a likelihood that you'll get involved with international students.

This sadness of departure seemed to be tempered with the realization of return home. Leaving the host country was a triple farewell: to people who touched their lives, places they had frequented, and a culture they appreciated.

### New Definitions of Family

'Home' is where someone hears and cares about that story, helps you sort out what you have seen, heard, and done—whether it be a triumph, a defeat, a high adventure, or a wash.

*Daloz et al.*

Saying goodbye to those with whom these students had shared a great deal during their time abroad was difficult. Meaningful connections had been made with host families, roommates, villagers, classmates, and host nationals. Necessarily then, students' concepts of family were broadened to encompass more ideas and people.

Leed (1991) noted that certain characteristics of the transformed traveler include the constant reframing of previously held ideas. In this study, students seemed to accept a larger family, finding different people who comprised their new conception of family. For example, Sonora found a best friend in her professor.

She and I really clicked. She is me when I'm forty-five. It's incredible . . . When I went back this summer I was really nervous . . . but no problem. I found my soul mate . . . It was just like I left last week. It was a really neat phenomenon that I had never experienced before.

This is not say that all the students in this study enjoyed such deep connections. For example, Cassie, though she appreciated the hospitality extended to her by her host family in Mexico, felt no close affinity to them. She instead found a small group of friends with whom she spent significant time and considered family. For Cameron, Adrienne, and Ryan, the eclectic group of fellow international students in their classes became their families. Each student found someone or something that meant "home."

### Dialectical Thought

The most merciful thing in the world: the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.

*HP Lovecraft*

All the students in this study encountered situations that were meaningless to them without cultural context. Dialogue with others was necessary for them to construct meaning from their encounters. The arena in which those important conversations took

place was important. For example, Cameron's experience with the skinhead in Germany was unsettling to him; it was through dialogue with his classmates in Germany (and later in the United States) that he was able to make meaning from that incident. Those students whose primary connections were with host country nationals seemed to have the greatest level of understanding of cultural nuances. Those who affiliated primarily with other international students seemed to have their understanding bound by the incomplete cultural inferences the group as a whole could make.

For example, Kim's inability to speak Tui restricted her verbal interactions to those that spoke English and were able to reach out to her. While looking at her photo album, she pointed to a group of about twenty farmers.

This is just a few of them, but this was the main group who would come and visit me at night after they had farmed all day . . . and they would just sit in the compound and just talk with me. They were so interested to know everything about America. Like poverty. They could not believe there was poverty in America. And I was like, "yeah," you know, and I tried to explain to them as best as I could. I had brought magazines with me so that they just sat there and looked at magazines forever . . . This lady was the only woman farmer who was there and she couldn't speak English, so she and I didn't get to talk a lot. But the interpretations and stuff, she was a great thinker.

Her understanding of their lives, filtered through their English words, was perhaps a different one than she would have reached if she had language fluency.

Conventionalized ideas about people, events, and values seemed to be only minimally challenged by contrasting perspectives.

#### Adrienne's Story

Travel is glamorous only in retrospect.

*Paul Theroux*

In the quote above, Theroux alludes to an aspect of travel that some may recognize. Often recollections about travels are like the proverbial fish story: they become increasingly embellished each time the story is told. Some students seemed to fall subject to this way of thinking; thus Adrienne's story is rare among travel stories.

She went to Germany to stay with the Weiss family—Heinz Weiss was a business associate of her father's and they had been friends for many years. One summer, in fact, Mr. Weiss's son came to America to visit.

Hanz was his name and he was eighteen. And we took him all over the U.S. We took him to Arizona, he wanted to see the Grand Canyon, and he took a bus out to New York to see Niagara and all that kind of stuff. He really enjoyed his summer here.

Adrienne had planned to go to South Africa through Rotary for a year but at the last minute, unrest in the country prevented her from leaving. Heinz heard about Adrienne's disappointment and emailed them, asking Adrienne to come stay with his family and learn German. Adrienne was ecstatic. That fall, she began German classes and bought her plane ticket over spring break. The two families were communicating primarily through email.

It was always Heinz who wrote these letters. And we wanted to make sure that everything was okay, that Margaret, Margaret was his wife, that they didn't mind that I stayed, and "No, no, she's looking forward to it." And all this kind of stuff . . . I planned to spend a year there. I was going to go to four months of intensive language school . . . and then I was going to go to the Heidelberg University and study there.

When she arrived in Germany, Mr. Weiss and Hanz met her. Margaret had stayed at the house. After time, it became apparent to Adrienne that something was not right at home.

The reason that I couldn't go to the university was that, um, Margaret. She had an illness that I didn't know about when I went over there. Heinz really wanted to return the favor [of Hanz staying with Adrienne's family in the United States]. He really wanted me to come over. So he had been saying that it was okay with his wife that I was coming over. But when I got there, I found out that she was totally against it, which doesn't happen to everybody, but it did happen to me, and it was very very difficult to live with her.

Her mental illness made her completely panicky with germs . . . so she made me scrub the shower out every time I took a shower. And dry it out. With a towel. She showed me how to dry. She made me dry every water spot off and then she'd check the shower. Every day. To make sure that it was clean.

I would come home from school and some of my things would be misplaced . . . like my letters and things. So she had been shuffling around in my room. And she would yell. She would get into these yelling frenzies and she would scream at her husband he would try to calm her down.

She would complain to me about how I would turn the key in the doorknob. Every day when I came home from school, she would be sitting there, waiting for me to come home and would go, "You turned it wrong. You do it wrong" . . . everything I did drove her crazy. And I knew my presence was aggravating her condition.

Adrienne began to spend increasing amounts of time at the school language lab, walking around in the city, and hanging out with her international friends because she did not want to go home. She also began spending more weekends traveling. She still held many of her emotions inside. She said,

I never wanted at all for anyone to think that I was uncomfortable, but I would call my parents. I could only get in touch with them once a week because, you know, the phone bill. And I would just cry. I am normally a very strong person, but it was just awful.

Adrienne tried to figure out a way to move elsewhere and still attend the university, but all of her options seemed cost prohibitive. The final straw came when, after returning home one weekend, Heinz met her and demanded that she spend at least ten hours a day studying German.

I said, "I can't do that." I said, "I'm going to school and everything." He goes, "Well, then you're not serious about why you came over here." And he was very

upset at me. I said, "Well, I'm sorry." He said, "Well, either you choose to learn the language or you can go home." I was like "Oh my word." So then I knew it was time to go . . . they said, "You know, your parents want us to take care of you and you are not doing what you should be doing." And finally I just broke down and called my parents and said, "I can't do this any more."

So, she returned to the United States after five months in Germany. Although the experience was severe, she was able to learn a valuable lesson. F. W. Robertson (1977) wrote, "As the tree is fertilized by its own broken branches and fallen leaves, and grows out of its own decay, so men and nations are bettered and improved by trial, and refined out of broken hopes and blighted expectations" (p. 123). Student stories of broken hopes and blighted expectations are not ones we often hear. Adrienne, although she had been home over a year when we spoke, had a powerfully forthright portrayal of her life in Germany.

I was glad that that was over with, but it was an experience in my life that I will never forget . . . I don't say it was a completely negative situation in my life. It was something that I'll never ever forget. I'll never go through it again. But I think it is important if you work with international exchanges that you're really up with those students and saying, "How's it going? How are you getting along?" I wasn't with any kind of an organization. Nobody sent me, I went myself. So it was much more difficult to know what to do in that situation.

Her experience continued to affect her after she returned to the United States.

It is hard for me not to think about it and move on. I have kept up with my German courses here at [her university]. And it was hard for me to go [to class] every day and think about other things. But it didn't leave me with a damper on my opinion of the German people or the German culture. I still think it is fascinating and interesting and I love it, but what I have struggled most with has been just getting over and feeling better. Because for so long I was just internalizing everything to protect the relationship with the family. I was just totally shocked. I couldn't believe it. And I thought, "Is this really happening? Is this real?"

It took courage for her to speak about the experience in our interview, dredging up all the emotions of the past. Kenneth Boulding (1980) said, “the besetting sin of most people is that it is easier to say clever things than true ones” (p. xi). Adrienne communicated things I would consider both true and clever. As intense encounters often can, her experience seemed to be a soul experience. I believe it is vitally important for students to be aware of stories such as Adrienne’s before traveling. Her story can perhaps aid students to be more aware of the multiple possibilities, situations, and outcomes of an international experience.

### Passage

Everything flows, nothing remains.

*Heraclitus*

The word passages, the feeling of being in transition, does not refer simply to the passing from one country to another. Rather, it denotes a sense of ambiguity that for these students often extended well into their return to the United States. This feeling of displacement may have some characteristics of culture shock. Oberg (1960) who popularized the term, explained, “Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (p. 177). As I reflected on my own reentry into the United States, the idea that seemed to best describe the transition was the feeling of a misty existence between two completely separate realities. During times of passage, perhaps some people feel as if they are living in a fog between two worlds. They anticipate their returns home, and seek to make meaning from their experiences, expecting everything to remain the same, yet knowing that everything changes.

### A Fog Between Two Worlds

It is one thing to transform oneself while abroad; quite another to have those changes last while back home. Thinking about returning to the United States was a difficult prospect for some of the students in this study. For example, Sonora spent one year in France and then returned for a second year after a brief time with her parents. Sonora considered her time in France life changing; indeed her first year in France did seem to be pivotal. She said,

It feels like I'm normal now, you know? It's almost like France made me normal. Because that is when, it kind of sparked my teenage rebellion . . . just a whole bunch of things. I mean, it was really transforming.

She went back for a second year, exploring some of the changes that had taken place within her in France where she felt more comfortable with her French friends. For Sonora, being in France ceased being a trip and became her life. She planned to return there to live after graduation in the United States.

For many of the other students, their integration into another culture was not as complete. Nonetheless, the student thought about their return home long before the actual departure date. Sometimes the lives they were living seemed a bit surreal. For example, while in Germany, a choir group from Cameron's college toured the area, and he was able to spend some time visiting with them. He wrote,

Seeing a group of people from back home helped put things in perspective. It brought me back to reality, and I realize that even though it will be hard to leave, there is a lot to look forward to at home. Also, having them here in my "fantasy world" make the past seven months more real than they were before. I was able to share a little bit of it with people I knew, making it more than just a dream!



Again, it was through interaction with others that he made sense of some of his feelings. That surrealistic feeling of living in a fantasy world seemed to be common for the respondents: at some time they seemed to feel as if they were living in a fog between two worlds.

### Anticipation of Return

Students had mixed reactions when contemplating returning to the United States. They seemed to wonder how their communities and families would receive them.

Cameron mused,

I've been thinking about the fact that I'm going to have to go home soon—only a couple months left. I can honestly say that I don't want to go, because I am going to miss it here so much. But I guess it will also be nice to be able to finally get my life back on track. It is so hard to get things done from over here because it's only temporary. I need to be somewhere that is more permanent and easier to run my life from. It's as if my life is on hold for a while.

His need to return to his perceived productive life was not necessarily representative of other respondents' feelings. Sonora, for example, fretted over how to tell her family that she wanted to return to France immediately.

So I called up dad, and I said, "Dad, I don't want to come home." And he said okay. Because he knew through letters and previous phone conversations and stuff how much I wanted to stay. So I stayed another semester, the spring semester, and came back to the states during the summer. But before I came back, I found a job as a nanny so I could go back the second year.

Cassie's reaction was different yet. She looked forward to seeing her brothers and parents again, but wanted to be sure to experience everything in Mexico before she left. She told her parents,

Whatever you do, do not call me these last two weeks. If any problems arise, I will call you. But just don't call me because I'm not going to be home.

For many, this seemed to be an unsettling time because they knew they had to leave soon, but they were not fully ready to adapt to life back in the United States. Ryan said,

Junior year [of high school] when I went over for two weeks, I was ready to come home after a week and a half and I was counting down the last four days before I could go home. I like Germany, I liked it over there. I knew I wanted to come back but I was ready to get the heck out. Junior year [of college] when I got done, and I was waiting in Frankfurt to board the flight, I was thinking of anything I could do to stay over there longer. Could I call the registrar and get them to extend it? Or maybe I could take one more term? I mean I was ready, I thought of almost anything . . . and then I was on the plane going home and I was like, I am an idiot.

This is often a period of time when students may begin to have an intense interest in careers that provide international opportunities. They feel a need to somehow put what they have learned into practice. Cassie, Sonora, and Gillian mentioned that they had a desire to work at the United Nations during this time. This can be a time marked by a need to develop a worldview defined not by boundaries, but by horizons.

#### Arrivals

No one steps into the same river twice.

*Heraclitus*

It has been said by travelers that the most difficult part of any journey is adapting to life back home (Kottler, 1997). There is an art to going back home. Especially in the United States, where the principles of individual freedom and self-confidence are so instilled, students may be unprepared for the apparent lack of interest in their experiences by family and friends. Reactions from immediate family members varied from person to person, but most families wished to see photo albums and hear stories. Ongoing dialogue, however, was not a part of any student's experience. It wasn't that their

families didn't care; daily pressures just did not allow for ongoing conversations. This affected the students. Sonora, with a change in her tone of voice, said,

My parents haven't really seen my pictures. The first time I was hurt, the second time, I didn't want to push my stuff. And they didn't ask to see them, and I didn't want to be like, "here, look at me, look at me" and so I didn't...but this is something I enjoyed and I wanted to share those good times with my family.

It appeared that families did not know how to help the students process the journeys, and that students seemed reluctant to share. They felt awkward. I asked Gillian if she shared her experiences with her family. She said,

Oh yeah. They all wanted to see photo albums and things, you know. They were like, "Oh, look at the pictures." They wanted to see pictures, they wanted to see what it was like...but they don't know. It could look exactly like home or completely different...our brains have to have schema...if you have that, you can build...it just doesn't seem important to them or they think, "Well, what does it matter to me? I just live here on this farm, and what am I ever going to do with this information?" Which maybe is true. What am I going to do with it all? Maybe something. Maybe nothing. Maybe it's just good to have. I don't know yet.

Cameron was abroad with a friend. When I asked him about sharing his experiences, he replied,

My parents to some extent. Even since we've been back, it's been with Jesse. I think that's one of the nice things about last year: someone else was there and went through the same things. We lived together and had the same friends and whatever, so it's easier to talk about things because we know what we're thinking, or you know, we can think back about the experience.

When you try and tell someone else, they might be interested, but they really don't know what you're feeling, which can be frustrating.

And yet, the individual transformations students undergo will affect the larger groups to which they belong (Kottler, 1997). Individual transformation can greatly affect group dynamics. When one person changes, the others may need to accommodate or adjust.

The students in this study spent time in reflection, trying to understand some of their feelings and then enjoyed sharing stories with their loved ones. Another common theme found in the respondent stories was that they resisted falling into roles they previously held within their homes and communities. Role negotiation was necessary during this arrival period.

### Reflection

Each student spent regular time in contemplation, mentally processing experiences. Cassie mentioned that her language proficiency followed an interesting progression. When she arrived in Mexico, at first she utilized every word she had learned. Later, as she learned more Spanish, she realized her sentence structure was not always sound and so she withdrew, trying to understand more. She described the process as cyclical and anticipated language would be easy once she arrived back in the United States. She found, however, that was not the case. She said,

It was a kind of confusing time . . . when I got back home, my English was horrible. I was telling stories, and there would be a word I just could not think of. It happened like every other sentence . . . I could not think of things. I was so frustrated. The cycle was so weird, it was like super-talk, stop, soak in, get to a certain level, then now that I'm back in the culture I am used to and it was like, "Ok, I can talk again. I really can." It was really weird. It lasted into when the semester started. That whole summer and maybe even the beginning of this school year . . . Then when I started getting it back my English was very conversational English. Now that I've been reading more textbooks, I feel that I can sound kind of intellectual again.

When Ryan spoke of things that seemed out of place when he returned to the United States, he also mentioned language,

When I walked in doors, I would expect people to be speaking German. And they weren't, they were all speaking English. And even today, if I can't think of the

word in English, I say it in German and people look at me like . . . “What are you talking about?”

For these students, this did not seem to be a time during which dialectical thought typically took place, but rather was a pronounced time of reflection. This seemed to be a time where ideas, like river currents, converged quietly. The process of dialectical thought may be compared to river rapids—there is beauty in the turmoil, in the force of the water against the stones, in the process of the water finding its own path. The process of reflection, however, might be compared to the deep, quiet, strong currents of the river. The turmoil, the engagement with different ways of thinking, take place on a different level and at the surface, all looks calm. Gillian talked about the influence of her experiences in France on her current views.

I don't know that it was necessarily my trip to France, but it was just exposure to the world. Because when you meet people, anything different from what you know, you have to believe that anything you learned might be wrong. If you are Muslim and I am Catholic and I meet you and we have discussions and I hear your beliefs and I tell you mine, do I still continue to think, “I'm glad you believe that, but you're still going to hell?” Do I think that God would do that? No . . . Reality is that everything changes . . . and what we know now might all be b.s. in three years . . . so we need to be constantly thinking of ways to integrate with new information. Because it is not like we're going to throw everything we know away. It's just going to evolve. Everything is going to evolve.

Gillian's experiences influenced those deep rivers of reflection to question many of the social structures we have in this culture. Traveling seemed to enhance these students' critical thinking skills. For example, Ryan ruminated about ethnocentricity,

I think that studying overseas made me realize that every country thinks that it is the best. If you go to Spain, they are convinced that they are the leaders. In France, they are the leaders. In Italy or Germany, they are the leaders too. And over here, everybody thinks that we are the leaders and I think that is a natural response, but it is not the only one.

Cameron's altercation with the skinhead was a focal point of his experience. As such, he spent time reflecting about expressions of prejudices through the need for affiliation. He wrote about the German punk culture,

I had taken the Strassenbahn and along the way a punk got on. The odd thing is that when I'm over here and see a punk or anarchist, I'm not worried at all. In fact, it relaxes me and I feel safer. If I were to encounter a situation like that at home, though, I would feel very nervous and wonder if he/she was going to cause some trouble. The reason for this is that over here the majority of them are opposed to racism and there is even a group of them, called the Redskins, that fight against Neo-nazis. As a foreigner, I view these people as being on my side. I wouldn't necessarily go up to them and initiate a conversation, but it's quite safe to assume that there won't be any confrontation either.

Back home, I think the opposite is usually perceived as the stereotype. If I was on a bus here, and a guy with a shaved head got on, I would immediately look at his boots to see if he had white laces. Whether or not he did, I would be very wary of him. If a punk got on, I would glance at him, but not feel threatened at all. The reverse happens back home. If I see a guy with a shaved head, I think he's a clean-cut guy. And if I see a punk, I assume he's looking for a fight. I find that odd.

After time, some of these private musings may become public through sharing with others, as the next section illustrates.

### Sharing

In the province of the mind, what one believes to be true either is true or becomes true.

*John Lilly*

Of all the things students looked forward to the most, sharing their experiences with their loved ones seemed to be at the top of the list. All students felt changed in some way by their experiences and desired to share their new insights with others. It was a shock to realize that, for the most part, others were not as eager to listen to those stories as much as the students looked forward to disclosing them. I have, among my other traveling friends, an understanding—before we begin a travel story, we see if it fits into

the “twenty second rule.” This is our way of explaining the maximum length of time we have noticed others are really willing to listen to a story about one of our international experiences. Invariably, after about twenty seconds, people begin to grow restless, especially if they are without a framework for understanding the topic of the story. There are many different ways we communicate with others about our international experiences (one of the most popular ways mentioned was through photo albums). These students realized quickly how difficult it is for others to listen to their stories. Cameron said,

It’s easier to talk about things with someone who knows what I’m thinking, you know. When you try and tell someone else, they might be interested, but they really don’t know what you’re feeling, which can be frustrating. I don’t know, there’s only so much you can tell before even parents get tired of hearing. Every once in a while I’ll bring something up. When I got back, I spent about five or six hours talking to them. And even though they’re curious and they want to know, there’s a certain limit.

Reentry programs (programs aimed at helping students readjust upon return home) at schools often help address some of the salient issues students abroad face when returning to the United States (Marks, 1987; Martin, 1985; Raschio, 1987; Uehara, 1986). Through these connections, students have a forum for discussing and sharing experiences.

The impact that a journey like this can have on the loved ones around them cannot be underestimated. As in most periods of adjustment, there is great potential for good or ill. If neither students nor families are committed to open communication, problems can arise. An extraordinary example is through Sonora’s story. She spent two years in France and perceived herself as greatly changed in self-confidence and interests. She communicated openly with her family about her positive experiences in France.

However, during her time in France, her closely-knit family in the United States began to feel as if she didn't care for them. Their feelings were manifested when Sonora's family picked her up at the airport and didn't ask her any questions about her trip.

Communication was limited until Thanksgiving when she sat down with her father to talk with him.

And so I talked to him about how it hurt me that he didn't want to talk about France or anything, and he said that he felt that it had taken me away from him. That it just created this big gulf. And I said, 'Well it has because you don't ever want to talk about it.' And so it's just kind of this vicious circle because he doesn't want to talk about it, then he doesn't understand me and since he doesn't understand me, he doesn't want to talk about it.

These interactions with loved ones can be exhausting, and the new loneliness students feel can cause anxiety and depression. Travel abroad can be a major source of stress for students and parents alike. It behooves both parties to communicate openly and honestly about these issues. Sponsoring agencies, if applicable, may also be able to provide assistance to families during this adjustment period.

### Roles

There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.

*Nelson Mandela*

Some of the students in this study sought transformative travel. In the earlier section on motivators for travel, desire for change was one reason cited. Students sought to reconstruct, perhaps their personalities, their habits, their interests. Sonora was forthright in expressing her desire for change.

I became sort of artsy and I love poetry and nature and things like that, and there I could do it all. Because there are all of these concerts and all these neat foreign films and people that love to talk about books and literature and stuff and it's just



really neat. So, yeah, when I came back, I was this person that my parents couldn't identify with anymore. We didn't really have the same interests anymore. And they are both really into church and things like that so they see it as my morals slipping . . . but I am really really glad that I went to France. Because if I hadn't, I would have been a sheep all my life, and just done what mom and dad wanted and just stayed in that rut that I was in. And so this is where I feel I woke up, I don't know. My curiosity was, my antennae were up and I'm just, I don't know. It was a transforming experience.

When I came back here, I was like, "Okay, at the movie theaters, what have we got? Well, we've got Rambo and all those blowing-up-people movies. And what have we got at the library to read? Uh, yeah, romance novels." So I was really bitter when I had to come back my fifth year of school, last year. I was just miserable. I just made myself miserable because I refused to like it. You know, I missed all those things [in France] so much. Good bread and cheese and literary discussions and foreign films.

I asked Sonora where she called home and after a long pause she replied,

Wherever I am. Wherever I am, I guess. I don't really have one right now. I just feel kind of nomadic because I don't want to go back to [hometown]. I never liked that city, and right now I really don't. I can't call France my home, really. I feel comfortable there, but I mean, I don't have a house or anything. I have people that I really like. And then, here, well I have really good friends here, so I guess I am just home where I am.

The feeling of displacement can last for varying periods of time. In this study, one of the most difficult things students seemed to struggle with was redefining their roles with their families. They felt different, and yet the same. Expectations tend to dictate the flavor of experience. Therefore, upon returning home, many of these students felt changed, full of confidence in their abilities. They were wary of slipping back into the patterns and habits they had before going abroad. For some, like Cameron, the return home was easier than for others. And yet, there were still awkward moments as illustrated in the following quote.

When you come back initially, right at the very beginning, you really think that there is a large difference between who you were there and who you are here. And I don't know whether that's more because maybe there actually is, or maybe

it is just because everyone says that's how you're supposed to feel. And maybe there really isn't any difference but you were in two different situations.

The tentative confusion in his comments and in Sonora's above, suggest how the process of returning can be difficult. In this study, none of the respondents had any sort of formal occasion to discuss their experiences with the agencies that had sponsored them.

### Future

It is in this period of time from early passage to early arrival in the United States that students were most committed to seek employment directly related to international affairs. For example, Sonora, Gillian, and Cassie wanted to work at the United Nations. Another often mentioned interest was the Peace Corps. This seemed to be a time during which these students focused on issues that transcended their day to day concerns, such as their standards of living and the quality of their futures. Traveling did seem to transform their thinking in various ways. Gillian said,

As I get older, I realize that I know less and less every year. I'm like, "How is this that at eighteen I knew so much and now I know nothing?" But we all just have to make our own paths, take our life experiences and then move forward based on those. That's what I plan to do.

Adrienne has been back from Germany for two years, and has found that her experiences still affect her.

I have to say I get anxious and nervous more than I ever used to. My stomach just clenches like this and I never experienced that before I went over there. I was a very laid back person. And now . . . if I'm giving a speech, my stomach will just go like this and get tense . . . I just had to work through it and get my mind off it. It just takes time, you know, time away from the situation.

The transformation that can happen through international travel is a cumulative phenomenon—the culmination of prior learning. Wherever the students are in their lives, encounters with another culture can enhance to their knowledge and experiences. This is encouraging because it means that students, regardless of their developmental levels, can use their experiences abroad for future good. Their experiences may lead to meaningful future encounters. In this developmentally fertile time, their minds have been planted with the seeds of international experience, and regardless of when those seeds sprout by way of reflection, meditation, and memories, they can influence meaning and purpose.

### Summary

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) wrote,

Qualitative research explores the poorly understood territories of human interaction. Like explorers who seek to identify and understand the biological and geological processes that create the patterns of a physical landscape, qualitative adventurers seek to describe and understand the processes that create the patterns of the human terrain. (p. 173)

This research sought to illuminate germane issues relating to study abroad in order to have a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of international educational experiences for college students. It is important to remember that old storytellers have an apparent ease with which the words flow that comes from repetition. They have told and retold their stories, perfecting plots, characterizations, and dramatic eloquence. Storytelling, like good public speaking, is a skill that is learned through practice. These students had just begun to polish their styles.

Woolf wrote, "Each has his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart and his friends can only read the title" (Bell, 1977, p. 33). These stories are

works in progress, and while I am confident that the students were honest in their enumerations, I will not presume that all they told me was exhaustive of their experiences. Experiences are like mountainsides with deep crevices and clefts that others may never know. It is not that students withheld information, but rather that we have limited conscious access to our own cognitive processes and can, at times, lack the ability to articulate our own transformations. As a researcher, I attempted to draw out as many nuances as possible, but the themes here can only be as reflective as the information the students' provided and the researcher's perceptiveness. These students were attempting, in many cases, to systematically derive meaning from their experiences verbally in the presence of a virtual stranger with a tape recorder. This can be daunting. However, these students were open to adventure and their stories were filled with a rich tapestry of description and transformative growth. Their stories can provide us with a more complete understanding of phenomena that many students abroad may experience.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Elements of Transformation

Students' experiences, illustrating transformation as an outcome of study abroad helped shed light on varying aspects of each student's development. Through the stories, it became possible to extrapolate themes that seemed to appropriately portray their experiences. When reviewing those themes, some students seemed to be equipped with skills that were helpful during their international educational experiences and helped them facilitate their own transformation. It seemed that some students were better prepared for transformation than others were.

Personality characteristics influenced student reactions. For example, Sonora prided herself on her fierce determination to achieve her goals. Her second year in France was made possible financially because she found employment as a nanny. Her relationship with her host family her first year had been so positive; she expected a similar experience with her new employer.

The second year was a lot more difficult than the first. The first was culture shock and language barriers and things like that. But I was in a really neat family setting where I was one of the family and being drug around, you know, from grandkids house to grandkids house to an upper-class family where the lady pretty much looked down on me and treated me like a servant. And I really wasn't expecting that at all. I mean, I wasn't expecting to be her equal because she was my employer, but her whole attitude was just pretty stinky.

Her employer had her sixth baby one month after Sonora began working for the family. She felt as if she had a lot of responsibility.

And so, about January, I was just really depressed. Because I was just so tired and just stressed from it all. But I'm really stubborn and so I thought, "Well, darn

it. I'm *not* going to let her get the better of me, and I'm *not* going back to the States" because I was determined to stay that other year.

When the situation became troublesome, Sonora had the language proficiency and drew on her determination to find a way to achieve her goals: to stay in France and go to school.

Adrienne reacted differently. She turned much of her stress inward, finally returning to the United States to heal. Her health became more important to her than her goals. Although handled in quite different ways, Sonora and Adrienne acted in ways that were consistent with their personality traits. Both learned valuable lessons.

In no way has this study sought to categorize or pigeonhole students into a particular stage of developmental progression. As efficient as it might have been to "rank" their experiences, it is my feeling that the classification would have been deceptive. Students had widely divergent motives that influenced their expectations of travel, and thus their experiences. It would be inappropriate to conclude that one type of experience is better than another—each type of experience seemed to adequately meet the needs of the students in this study.

That reality may be partially socially constructed seemed to make an impact on Gillian. She spoke about many differences between United States and France cultural norms, and the conversation drifted to religions.

It's not as if they don't have anything to teach us. It's different. It's different than European culture. You think about Native American religions and all of the non-western religions. But is it wrong? If I'm Catholic and you're Methodist, am I better than you are? If you're Muslim and I'm Catholic and I meet you and we have discussions and I hear your beliefs and I tell you mine, do I still continue to think, "I'm glad you believe that, but you're still going to hell?" Do I think that God would do that? No.

Just as Gillian found it uncomfortable to believe that her conception of truth was the only one, I found it impossible to think of one student's experience in terms of greater enlightenment or transformation than another's. A hierarchical model outlining the process of meaning making would perhaps be deluding by encouraging an impartial categorization of each student's complex, rich, and very real experience. These students told compelling stories, and it is my hope that their recantations struck a chord, so to speak, in the readers. Perhaps, while reading their stories, we felt strong affinities toward some students and saw less of ourselves in others. It was never the intent of this study to assess student experiences in a foreign culture in a detached manner, but rather to give their experiences voice within the scholarly literature. Although each experience was filled with richness, there were elements of cultural encounters that seemed to facilitate transformation in students. It is important, then, to present them together so that the reader may draw conclusions about the implications the findings of this study may hold for enhancing the study abroad experience.

### Making Meaning

Fundamentally, there appeared to be elements of international educational experiences that promoted transformation: studying abroad for a period of time longer than one summer, having basic language competency, feeling confident of at least one trustworthy connection with a school advisor at a home institution or in the foreign country, living with a host family, and engaging in reflective activities. Students constructed meaning from their experiences in many different ways. Some students, however, seemed to employ critical thinking skills at a higher level than others, engaging

in more complex dialogue and drawing deeper conclusions about themselves and their experiences. The more traumatic experiences seemed to permit deeper insights. For example, Cameron's encounter with prejudicial hatred, Adrienne's intolerable host family situation, and Sonora's disappointment with her employment all seemed to encourage students to reflect in a detached manner about their lives.

### The Importance of Reflection

Although there were differences in the ways students constructed meaning, spending time in reflection seemed to deepen student awareness abroad. Quiet contemplation allowed students to shift time, to focus on fully experiencing the study abroad venture. Students who were committed to the process of cultural awareness—rather than the achievement of it—seemed to have a more realistic understanding of the cultural intricacies that pervaded and gave meaning to their experiences.

Across the diversity of students, those who employed formal means of reflection, such as journal writing, seemed to express richer and broader perceptions than other respondents. Students who were more likely to spend time in reflection also seemed more aware of the subtle nuances through which cultural norms may be illustrated.

Spending time in reflective activities seemed to benefit the students who wished to employ critical thinking skills at a higher level. An indicator of this was shown in some students who seemed to feel more comfortable discussing complex issues. They were more comfortable holding two directly opposing viewpoints simultaneously—understanding the inherent conflict between the two—and yet able to incorporate those divergent ideas into their daily thinking. This has been referred to as dialectical thought,



which Daloz et al. (1996) refer to as, “the ability to recognize and work effectively with contradictions by resisting closure or by reframing one’s response” (p. 108). Those who were not disposed to reflection seemed to have assimilated their experiences primarily into pre-existing frameworks, as Ryan did in the German hotel, drawing firm conclusions about what must have been correct and true and being less likely to broaden or amend their own concepts to accommodate to other views.

### Cultural Awareness

Those who understood that cultural awareness is something best experienced, not achieved, seemed to integrate their experiences more fully into the inner landscapes of their lives. Indeed, it was the students who were committed to the *process* of cultural awareness who seemed to be more mindful of the personal transformations that were taking place. A typical way they exemplified this was by seeking out activities that would allow them to gain more understanding about complex cultural issues. Gillian, for example, had conversations with others on topics she thought she understood, such as racism in the United States. However, the varying perspectives of others stretched the boundaries of her comfort zone, encouraging her to see at the same issues with new eyes.

Another way students seemed to develop an enhanced sense of cultural awareness was by living with host families. The host family relationship is by nature a deeply personal one. Cultural differences—inevitable at some time—with host family members seemed to greatly influence the construction of the lens through which the students saw and interpreted their experiences abroad. In addition, interactions with host families—positive and negative—seemed to establish within the students an emotional sense about

the safety of the culture as well as the country in which they lived. Those who lived with host families also seemed to share more about what they had learned about themselves; those who did not, tended to share more about the experiences they had.

Language acquisition also played a role in the level of cultural understanding students attained. Three respondents gave examples of how, when riding on buses and trains, they were able to engage in conversations with those next to them about philosophical concepts. As mentioned before, Gillian spoke with an older French gentleman on a bus about racism in the United States. That conversation seemed to have shaped her own desires to understand more than her own perspectives, to learn from the perspectives of others. This desire led her to find an environment at her university where that kind of learning might be more likely to occur: she began working in a study abroad office.

Basic language competency allowed students such as Gillian to have such conversations. Through an understanding of language, it was easier for them to make sense of behaviors they encountered. They were able to discern standard cultural norms, learning more quickly how to behave in certain situations (such as how to carry on courteous conversations, carefully avoiding behaviors that have, in the past, have given United States citizens the “ugly American” label).

In this study, the types of pre-departure preparations in which student engaged seemed to influence the types of experiences students had while abroad. When Kim, for example, left for Ghana, the primary tool of understanding with which she equipped herself was observation. Therefore, her understanding was necessarily limited to the

information acquired through that one tool. Those who spent formal time learning about their host cultures before leaving home seemed to have more realistic expectations, to be more prepared for their encounters, to acclimate more quickly, and to make clearer meaning from their encounters.

It is difficult to isolate one particular characteristic that principally aided cultural awareness. In this study, the combined synergy of the characteristics created a delicate interplay of factors that impacted these students' experiences. In other words, the overall transformation that took place in the students' lives was more than just a summing of any of the parts of cultural awareness.

#### Motivators and the Relationship to Outcomes

Regardless of their widely differing expectations and personal characteristics, the students in this study held two things in common: each had experiences that were anticipated based upon their expectations and behaviors, and they all had completely unexpected experiences, enduring the consequences of their actions. For example, Cameron took a trip to see a concert in southern Germany. He expected to hear great bands. He did not, however, expect to spend two days in the rain, eating cold bratwurst. He never anticipated that he would be sleeping in chapels, ATM foyers, and under circus tents. It was, however, those unexpected consequences of his spontaneous adventure that seemed to create the most vivid memories for him. In this study, students tended to draw more heavily on the unanticipated consequences in order to articulate how they made meaning from their encounters rather than on anticipated outcomes (such as increased language proficiency). Recollections of those unanticipated outcomes seemed to have the

best entertainment value for these students. Again, reflective activities were important for them to make meaning from their encounters.

### Anticipated Outcomes

Students expected certain things to occur while they were traveling abroad. All expected to gain some language skills. Most believed that international travel is a quality of the educated person and anticipated that some type of change would take place. They had all heard of culture shock and so they expected a time of transition would be required in order to adjust to life in a new culture. Those who spent time intentionally preparing for departure seemed to maximize the likelihood of experiencing the anticipated. For example, Sonora had been preparing to go abroad for quite some time. She met her host family in the United States and expected to fully enculturate during her time in France. Her extensive pre-departure language and culture preparations helped her plan for a certain type of experience abroad.

### Unexpected Consequences

Regardless of the level of preparation, every student in this study, at one time or another, dealt with the unexpected consequences of travel abroad. After all, life is serendipitous by nature. It did seem, however, that if students spent time in reflection, analyzing their reactions to cultural encounters, they handled unanticipated experiences in a manner that was consistent with their personalities and natures. Those who were not predisposed to reflection seemed to have higher anxiety levels when dealing with unexpected events, perhaps had a higher need for control, and tended to deal with life's surprises in ways that were uncharacteristic. Ryan's reaction in the hotel during his

initial days in Germany, for example, was not consistent with his behavior during the rest of his year. Through reflection, the interplay between students' inner states and outer environments seemed to be enhanced, allowing these students to more fully integrate their experiences—both anticipated and unexpected—into the inner landscapes of their lives.

### Implications for Practice

Though the implications of this research are not intended to be prescriptive in nature, the following are insights gained from these students about the elements of their international educational experiences that seemed important. I believe that these insights may be helpful to others.

1. In this study, those students who were equipped with multiple tools of meaning making seemed better prepared to maximize their experiences abroad. This would suggest that students might benefit by engaging in some formal reflective activities. For example, prior to departure, they might take a personality inventory, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory or the Omnibus Personality Inventory. Conscious awareness of their personality characteristics may assist students in understanding how someone with particular traits might relate and respond to certain elements of the culture that they are about to enter. When abroad, keeping a journal was one reflective activity that seemed to enhance reflection.

2. After returning to the United States, one way to encourage deeper meaning making is through ongoing exposure to and engagement with global and international

activities and resources. There are many videos, resources, and books that focus on helping students re-adjust to life in the United States.

3. Students are at different points of entry into the process of cultural meaning making. Students bring distinct motivations and goals with them, and as such, it seems unlikely that one program exists that could appeal to and assist all students in having transformational international experiences.

4. It seemed important for these students to have touchstones while abroad. These touchstones took many forms but one of the most important relationships was with at least one student advisor (in the host country or in the United States) who could provide aid if they needed emergency assistance. When that relationship existed, students seemed more willing to take risks. Another touchstone for students in this study was email. Email was another avenue that at least two students in this study utilized while abroad, and contact with those in the United States tended to help them feel less isolated.

5. Students made meaning through dialectical thought. Those who engaged in stimulating conversations with others used those encounters to make meaning of their experiences. Through dialectical conversations, students seemed to be able to temper their eager expectations with a more likely reality.

#### Future Research

This research sought to illuminate elements of transformation for students abroad. As such, its focus was circumscribed, aiming to highlight issues pertaining to that goal. This research has been an initial attempt to understand international educational

experiences through qualitative methodology. It has not been comprehensive, but thorough; yet rich areas for further exploration still remain.

1. As mentioned in the methodology section of this thesis, the information in these pages is constrained by the information students provided. If no formal method for gaining access to one's own cognitive processes has been undertaken, it can be challenging to articulate meaning making. Pre-departure and reentry programs can be helpful in this regard, especially if they encourage reflection, but when those are missing from an international educational experience, researchers may find it rewarding to explore how access to one's own cognition may be facilitated.

2. The initial disposition of students was not explored in this study. It may, though, have an effect on whether individual worldviews are more or less permeable.

3. Open Doors publishes statistics about US citizens abroad. In the years 1995 and 1996 (the most recent information available at the time of this study), eighty-six percent of United States students abroad were Caucasian. Hispanic and Asian American students abroad comprised approximately five percent each of the total United States student population abroad. African Americans comprised only three tenths of one percent of those abroad. This would seem to indicate that barriers exist for ethnic minority students in the United States, and would be a ripe area for further exploration.

4. While reviewing the literature for this study nontraditionally aged students who have international educational experiences were not mentioned. Currently, the age of students abroad is not included in reports such as Open Doors. However, students over twenty-six years of age constitute the largest growing sector of students currently

entering institutions of higher education, and therefore it would seem appropriate to explore their experiences in college with respect to international education.

5. Allocentrism and psychocentrism as travel characteristics might relate to other motivational distinctions (such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation). This possible relationship might be rewarding for researchers to explore.

6. All the respondents in this study were from midwestern institutions. Most were from rural areas. Further research determining if the experiences for students from metropolitan, urban, highly diverse communities differ from those from rural areas may be a profitable endeavor.

7. A follow-up conversation with the respondents in this study in five or ten years might illuminate issues different from those in this study.

8. This study focused on United States citizens who studied abroad. It would be interesting to explore whether the themes presented within this thesis transcend cultural boundaries. For example, do international students studying in the United States face similar issues as the students in this study?

9. Finally, it might be helpful to research whether those who studied abroad over a decade ago believe their experiences have influenced their lives in any way. For example, do they participate in internationally driven and globally minded activities? Has their commitment to a common good been strengthened because of their experiences with other cultures? Do they believe their experiences abroad influenced in any ways, their life-long decision making, such as career path or family decisions?



### Summary

This study was conducted in order to gain a more complete understanding of the transformative potential that international educational experiences can hold for college students. While the findings of this study have made no claims of representation for all students in the United States, the exploration of seven college student experiences might be seen as illustrative of student experiences within the context of study abroad.

Seven traditionally aged college students were selected to participate in this study. Their stories were evaluated as a group to discern commonalities that existed across their diverse experiences. These were framed as a cyclical process of departures, passages, and arrivals with the emergent themes explored within this framework. Special attention was given to how students seemed to construct meaning from their encounters with difference.

Students' motivators for travel seemed to affect the types of experiences they had while abroad. Other factors, such as the need to understand, affiliate, and create experiences appeared to be influential. In addition, pre-conceived notions and expectations of host cultures, definitions of family, the amount of time spent in dialectical thought, and students' abilities to share with others seemed pivotal. However, it became apparent that regardless of experiences, the students who spent more time in reflection and engaging in introspective activities seemed to become more adept at creating richer meaning from their experiences.

A brief overview of the history of international education in the United States was included that touched on select student development literature. A review of the literature

underscored the prevalent use of quantitative methodology to measure the impact of study abroad, pointing out the limitations of this approach to adequately understand the complexities of an experience such as study abroad. Student voices, with their rich and moving stories, have traditionally been absent from the literature. To complete the picture presented by the quantitative research, this study was grounded in a qualitative inductive approach to knowledge. The implications for practice that have been presented are based on these student experiences.

Studying abroad was a transforming experience for many of the students in this study. Future systematic research efforts may continue to illuminate the salient issues students may face while living and studying abroad.

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## APPENDIX A

### Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this research project is to qualitatively identify what students learn from international experiences. This project will be undertaken by Sami Lyn Story in order to provide information for a master's thesis.

By agreeing to participate in this project, you will be interviewed and your responses will be tape recorded. Your story will be told in confidentiality, and no identifying characteristics will be used in the final paper.

Please understand that your participation is voluntary and gratis, and that if you do not wish to participate, or if you wish to withdraw from the project at any time, there will be no penalty for doing so. For general questions, please contact the following people:

Sami Lyn Story  
University of Northern Iowa  
Educational Leadership, Counseling, and PostSecondary Education  
319.273.5876 (GA Office)  
319.273.2605(Departmental Office)  
319.273.8957 (Residence)

Dr. Michael Waggoner  
University of Northern Iowa  
Department Head and Faculty Advisor  
Educational Leadership, Counseling, and PostSecondary Education  
319.273.2605(Departmental Office)

For answers to questions about the rights of research subjects, please contact  
Office of Human Subjects Coordinator  
University of Northern Iowa  
319.273.2748

✂ \_\_\_\_\_  
I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of subject or responsible agent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Printed name of subject)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of investigator)

**Appendix B**  
**Biographical Informational Sheet**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: (school) \_\_\_\_\_ (permanent) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

H.S. attended: \_\_\_\_\_

Year in College: \_\_\_\_\_

Major(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Minor(s): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

International Program(s) Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Sponsor: \_\_\_\_\_

Date, location, & length of stay: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Housing: \_\_\_\_\_

Employment: \_\_\_\_\_

Primary purpose of experience: \_\_\_\_\_

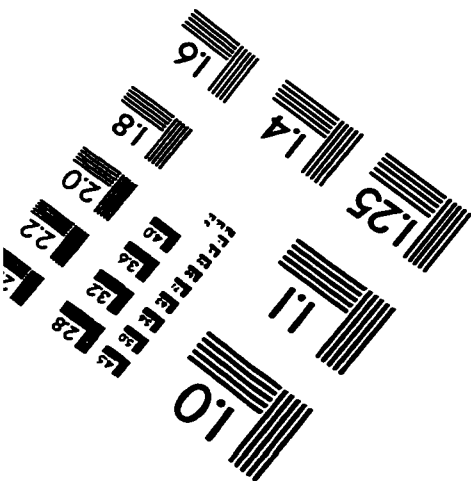
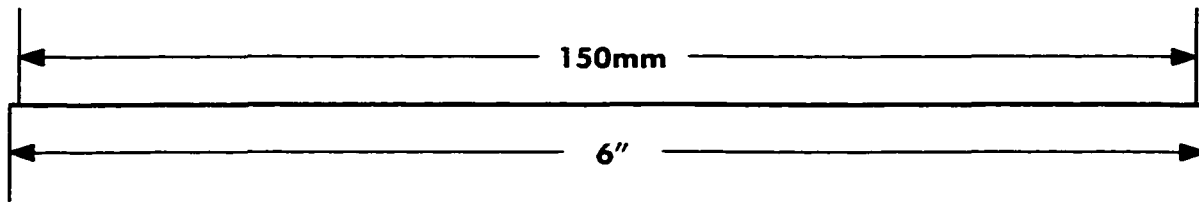
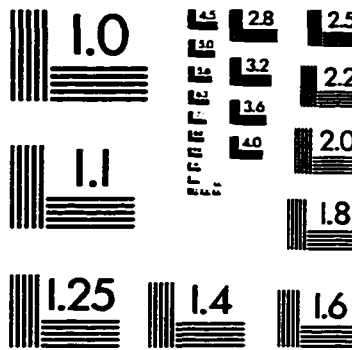
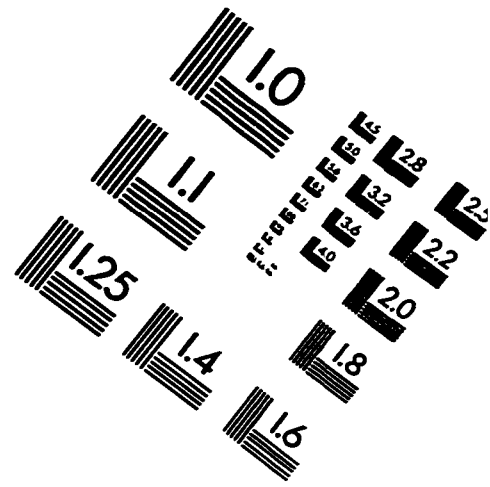
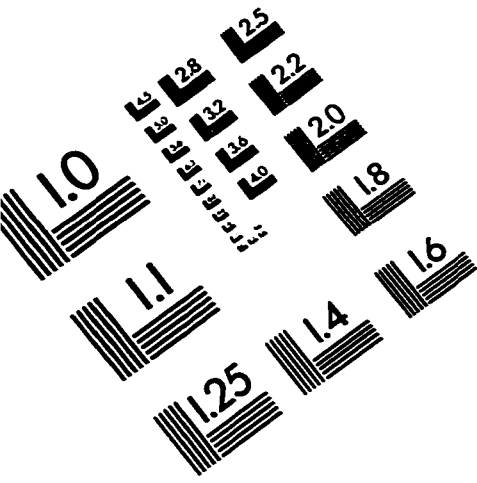
Language competency requirements and/or preparation: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol

- Where did you go, what did you do?
- Were you the first in your family to study abroad?
- What was your host family like?
- Who were your closest friends there?
- In what way do you think language competency affected your experience?
- With whom have you most thoroughly shared with about your experience?
- Did you have any mentors there?
- Was there a time while you were there that you felt completely “at home”?
- Did you have any “ah-hah” moments while you were there?
- Since you’ve been home, what have you –taught most? –learned most?
- Do you think there would have been a difference if you’d stayed a sem/year?

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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